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Radical Right, National Context, and Historical Legacies: a comparative study of Vox and PiS in Spain and Poland

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Preface

My interest in populist radical right (PRR) formations dates back eight years, specifically to when I was studying for my undergraduate degree in International Relations at the Complutense University of Madrid. At the time, I was writing my final dissertation on populism, exploring whether it was a direct consequence of the 2008 economic crisis. I focused on two political parties from different ideological families: Podemos in Spain and the Front National in France. Despite being ideologically distinct, these parties shared a key feature: both had emerged as the "winners" of the 2014 European Parliament elections, largely through the use of populist discursive strategies. I consider Podemos to have been a "winner", even though, as will be seen throughout this thesis, it was not strictly so in electoral terms. However, within just four months of its creation, the party secured five MEPs—a remarkable feat for a movement founded only months earlier by a group of political science professors from the Complutense University, based at the Somosaguas faculty, where I was studying and where some of them had taught me.

This phenomenon—and its growing societal impact, especially on me, as it awakened an unimaginable political fervour—led me to focus on populism in my undergraduate thesis. This decision was also inspired by my reading of one of the most influential works in my academic development: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

Although I continued to follow the populist phenomenon and the electoral rise of such parties with great interest, it was not until 2018 that my engagement with the PRR intensified. On 2 December of that year, the Spanish party Vox—an openly PRR formation—entered the Andalusian Parliament, breaking the supposed immunity that had characterised post-1978 Spain against the emergence of such parties. At that point, the PRR had already become a consolidated political force in many European countries, but as the Spanish saying goes: "you don't believe it until you see it with your own eyes." And that is precisely what happened. From that moment on, Vox became a political force with staying power—and who knows whether, in the near future, it might even lead the Spanish government. I sincerely hope not.

At that time, I was finishing my master's degree in International Economics and Development and had begun working on my final research project—my first major piece of academic work and also my first publication. The previous summer, I had travelled with my parents to Warsaw, a city that fascinated me and sparked a question in my mind: how was it possible that a country that had exited communism only three decades earlier had reached such impressive levels of development? This curiosity led me to study Poland and write about the so-called "Polish economic miracle." In doing so, I discovered the political party Law and Justice (PiS), which, after years of research, I have come to understand in much greater depth—and which continues to be a source of academic interest and curiosity.

That first research project and subsequent publication marked a turning point: I decided to pursue an academic career and enrolled in a doctoral school. I began by researching the Spanish political system and the new parties that emerged after the 15-M movement—an event that defined my generation. This line of inquiry led me to apply for an Erasmus scholarship at a university I had not previously known: Marie Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. There, during a political science methodology course, I met Irma Słoczyńska, who encouraged me to transfer my academic record and continue my doctoral studies at that institution. This move not only allowed me to study abroad but also enabled me to return to the topic that had first sparked my academic interest: the PRR. It was then that I decided to focus my thesis on the cases of Spain and Poland.

For all of these reasons, I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to my initial doctoral supervisor, Irma, for her dedication, effort, support, and personal commitment to this project. Likewise, I would like to extend my thanks to my current supervisor, Professor Jacek Wojnicki, for his unwavering support, guidance, and belief in my work throughout the research process. Without his encouragement, I would not be writing these words today.

I also wish to thank Professor Piotr Zagórski of the Autonomous University of Madrid, who, during my nine-month research stay at that institution, became my tutor, supervisor, and primary academic reference. Thanks to his guidance, I was able to rethink and refine my research approach, adding greater coherence and depth to the project and ultimately achieving the results I present here. I am also grateful

to all the professors and researchers with whom I have shared this journey, and whose insights and feedback helped shape the final content of this dissertation.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to all those who have given me their love and affection throughout my life and have been a constant source of emotional support—not only in my academic journey, but in life more broadly. To my parents and my family: it is thanks to you that I have come this far, and I hope you are proud of the result. I cannot end these pages without expressing my heartfelt thanks to the person who has accompanied me in this journey called life, making everything easier and more beautiful: thank you, Sara. And of course, to my friends, who are also an essential part of my life. I hope—and truly wish—that all of you are proud of the result of this doctoral thesis, which has required so much effort, sacrifice, time, dedication… and yes, the occasional frustration and disappointment too.

Abstract

English

This doctoral dissertation, entitled *Radical Right, National Context, and Historical Legacies: A Comparative Study of Vox and PiS in Spain and Poland*, aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the populist radical right (PRR) in Europe, focusing on the cases of Vox in Spain and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland. While both parties belong to the same political family by virtue of their shared ideological features, they represent distinct expressions of the PRR within the European context.

Building on a multidimensional theoretical framework grounded in the core ideological traits of the PRR—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—as conceptualised by Cas Mudde (2007), and incorporating the "winning formulas" theory of Herbert Kitschelt and McGann to classify these parties along economic lines, this thesis examines how such dimensions are ideologically articulated, programmatically expressed, discursively deployed, and institutionally embedded in Spain and Poland.

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative discourse and programme analysis with quantitative data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al., 2024). This methodology enables the triangulation of discursive, programmatic, and expert-coded data, and introduces a comparative visualisation model based on scatterplots and quadrant typologies, allowing for the systematic positioning of PRR parties along both ideological and economic axes.

The findings confirm that, while Vox and PiS are part of the same PRR party family, they constitute distinct and non-equivalent variants, shaped by their respective historical legacies, authoritarian trajectories, political systems, and opportunity structures. Vox is conceptualised as a liberal–authoritarian variant of the PRR, rooted in Spain's post-Franco consensus and characterised by strong economic liberalism, moral authoritarianism, and traditionalist nationalism. By contrast, PiS represents an interventionist–authoritarian variant, embedded in post-Solidarity Catholic conservatism and defined by welfare nationalism and cultural authoritarianism.

Beyond the core ideological features of the PRR, both parties incorporate additional dimensions—ruralism, Euroscepticism, climate scepticism, and anti-globalism—as well as divergent economic orientations. These findings reinforce the need for context-sensitive, regionally grounded typologies. The thesis concludes that the PRR in Europe should not be understood as a homogeneous bloc, but rather as a heterogeneous party family whose ideological configurations and developmental trajectories are deeply shaped by historical and institutional factors.

This study contributes to the literature on the PRR by offering a nuanced and empirically grounded typology that enables more precise cross-national comparison.

Keywords: Populist Radical Right (PRR); Vox; Law and Justice (PiS); Spain; Poland; Nativism; Authoritarianism; Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES); Comparative political analysis.

Polish

Niniejsza rozprawa doktorska, zatytułowana *Radykalna prawica, kontekst narodowy i dziedzictwa historyczne: analiza porównawcza partii Vox i PiS w Hiszpanii i Polsce*, ma na celu przeprowadzenie pogłębionej analizy populistycznej radykalnej prawicy (PRR) w Europie, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem przypadków partii Vox w Hiszpanii oraz Prawa i Sprawiedliwości (PiS) w Polsce. Choć obie partie należą do tej samej rodziny politycznej ze względu na wspólne cechy ideologiczne, reprezentują one odmienne warianty PRR w kontekście europejskim.

Rozprawa opiera się na wielowymiarowych ramach teoretycznych zakorzenionych w trzech podstawowych komponentach ideologicznych PRR — nacjonalizmie (natywizmie), autorytaryzmie i populizmie — zgodnie z ujęciem Casa Muddego (2007), a także wykorzystuje teorię „zwycięskich formuł" autorstwa Herberta Kitschelta i McGanna do klasyfikacji analizowanych partii pod względem orientacji gospodarczej. Praca bada, w jaki sposób wspomniane komponenty są ideologicznie artykułowane, programowo wyrażane, dyskursywnie wykorzystywane oraz instytucjonalnie zakorzenione w realiach Hiszpanii i Polski.

Zastosowano podejście mieszane, łączące jakościową analizę dyskursu i dokumentów programowych z danymi ilościowymi pochodzącymi z Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Jolly i in., 2022; Rovny i in., 2024). Zastosowana metodologia umożliwia triangulację danych dyskursywnych, programowych oraz eksperckich, a także wprowadza model porównawczy oparty na wykresach rozrzutu i typologiach kwadrantowych, co pozwala na systematyczne pozycjonowanie partii PRR na osiach ideologicznych i gospodarczych.

Uzyskane wyniki potwierdzają, że choć Vox i PiS należą do tej samej rodziny partyjnej PRR, stanowią odmienne i nieekwiwalentne warianty, ukształtowane przez ich specyficzne dziedzictwa historyczne, trajektorie autorytarne, systemy polityczne i struktury możliwości politycznych. Vox został zaklasyfikowany jako liberalno-autorytarny wariant PRR, osadzony w postfrankistowskim konsensusie hiszpańskim i charakteryzujący się silnym liberalizmem gospodarczym, autorytaryzmem moralnym i tradycjonalistycznym nacjonalizmem. PiS natomiast reprezentuje interwencjonistyczno-autorytarny wariant PRR, zakorzeniony w

katolickim konserwatyzmie wywodzącym się z tradycji „Solidarności” i definiowany poprzez nacjonalizm socjalny oraz autorytaryzm kulturowy.

Poza podstawowymi cechami ideologicznymi PRR, obie partie włączają również dodatkowe wymiary, takie jak ruralizm, eurosceptycyzm, sceptycyzm klimatyczny czy antyglobalizm, a także wykazują odmienne orientacje gospodarcze. Wyniki te potwierdzają potrzebę opracowywania typologii uwzględniających kontekst i specyfikę regionalną. Rozprawa dowodzi, że europejska PRR nie stanowi jednolitego bloku, lecz heterogeniczną rodzinę partyjną, której konfiguracje ideologiczne i ścieżki rozwojowe są głęboko zakorzenione w uwarunkowaniach historycznych i instytucjonalnych.

Niniejsza praca wnosi wkład do literatury dotyczącej PRR, oferując pogłębioną, empirycznie ugruntowaną typologię, umożliwiającą precyzyjniejsze porównania między państwami.

Słowa kluczowe: Populistyczna radykalna prawica (PRR); Vox; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS); Hiszpania; Polska; natywizm; autorytaryzm; Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES); porównawcza analiza polityczna.

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1. Chapter 1. Introduction

The introduction provides an overview of the background of the topic the PRR in Europe- with particular attention to the cases of Spain and Poland. It outlines the rationale that leads to the formulation of the research problem and identifies the main analytical categories that guide the investigation. In addition, the research design will be presented. Finally, the introduction sets out the expected theoretical and practical contributions of the thesis.

1.1 Background and topic introduction

1.1.1 The rise and normalisation of the PRR in Europe

The emergence, rise, and even institutionalisation of PRR parties in Europe has become an incontrovertible fact. Today, the vast majority of European political systems include parties of this ideological family, which exert varying degrees of influence on national political life. As of 2024, almost all European Union member states have PRR representation in their national parliaments, with the sole exceptions being Ireland, Luxembourg, and Malta. Moreover, PRR parties currently participate in government in at least seven EU member states—namely Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and the Czech Republic. In Sweden, the survival of the centre-right government depends on a confidence-and-supply agreement with the nationalist Sweden Democrats, now the second-largest parliamentary force. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, leader of the Islamophobic Party for Freedom (PVV), brokered a historic deal to form what has been described as the most right-wing government in the country's post-war history. Meanwhile, in Poland, although PiS won its third consecutive general election in 2023, it was eventually ousted from office by a parliamentary majority led by the opposition, following years of controversy surrounding the party's illiberal reforms (Politico, 2024).

The electoral success of the PRR appears indisputable. In many countries, these parties have surpassed the 20–25% threshold, securing historically unprecedented victories. The 2024 European Parliament elections illustrate this trend vividly: PRR parties secured approximately 200 seats—nearly one-quarter of the chamber—making them the third-largest bloc in the European Parliament after the European People's Party (EPP) and the Socialists & Democrats (S&D), despite their

fragmentation across different parliamentary groups. In several key states, they emerged as the most voted political forces. In France, Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* (RN) obtained over 31% of the vote, doubling the support received by Emmanuel Macron's party and winning the first round of the legislative elections for the first time in its history. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's *Brothers of Italy* (FdI) secured approximately 28%, confirming its hegemonic position in the ruling coalition. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz* maintained its dominance. Similarly, in Poland, PiS returned as the leading force in the European elections, despite losing control of the national government in 2023. In Austria, the *Freedom Party* (FPÖ) secured over 25% of the vote, topping both the European and general elections held later that year. In Belgium, the Flemish nationalist *Vlaams Belang* recorded its best-ever result, strengthening its influence at both the regional and federal levels (European Parliament, 2024).

A particularly noteworthy case is that of Germany. Although PRR parties have not entered the federal government, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has firmly established itself as the country's second political force, overtaking the Social Democrats of Chancellor Olaf Scholz in the 2024 European elections. Even more striking, the AfD secured unprecedented victories in regional elections in the east. In September 2024, the party won its first-ever regional election in Thuringia, obtaining over 30% of the vote—a landmark moment, marking the first time a far-right party had won a German state election since the Second World War.

Despite this widespread success, the trajectory of populist PRR parties has not been linear or homogeneous over time. In the post-war period, far-right parties were marginal actors in most national political systems. Although they occasionally attracted public attention, they remained electorally weak and largely confined to the political periphery. They were typically regarded as residual manifestations of early-twentieth-century fascism and Nazism—ideologies considered obsolete in modern liberal democracies.

This situation began to change several decades later. From the late 1980s and early 1990s, after a prolonged period of political insignificance, various PRR formations re-emerged with growing prominence, becoming central actors in contemporary European politics. This resurgence has frequently been associated with what Klaus von Beyme (1988) termed the "third wave" of right-wing extremism in Europe, and

with Piero Ignazi's (1992) concept of a "silent counter-revolution" to explain the rise of these parties. Simultaneously, the global ascendance of populism led Cas Mudde to describe the early twenty-first century as marked by a *populist Zeitgeist* (Mudde, 2004). More recently, Mudde (2019) has argued that Europe is now experiencing a "fourth wave" of post-war far-right politics—characterised not only by the electoral rise of PRR parties but also by their increasing integration into conventional politics and the normalisation of their ideas within mainstream public discourse.

The boundaries that once separated PRR actors from the political mainstream have become increasingly blurred. One of the defining features of this new stage has been the erosion of traditional *cordon sanitaire* strategies, which for decades aimed to isolate these parties from positions of influence. This strategy is now in visible decline: the political veto against the far right has weakened as PRR parties have grown both electorally and institutionally. Their gradual legitimisation—first by segments of the electorate, and later by mainstream political actors willing to enter into coalitions or agreements with them—has paved the way for their incremental inclusion in the political system. This process is widely referred to in the literature as the normalisation of the PRR.

The growing prominence of PRR parties has become one of the defining trends of twenty-first-century European politics. Yet this prominence has often come at a cost. In several contexts, it has been accompanied by increasing challenges to democratic institutions and, in some cases, by a rollback of liberal democratic standards—particularly regarding the protection of minority rights and adherence to constitutional checks and balances. In this regard, the rise of the PRR poses not only a political but also a normative and institutional challenge to contemporary European democracies.

This new centrality of the PRR is reflected not only in electoral results and parliamentary dynamics but also in public discourse and media coverage. It could be argued that the PRR is currently *in vogue*. These movements and parties receive disproportionate levels of public attention and provoke intense debate, amplified by the immediacy and reach of social media. The provocative actions and controversial statements of their leaders frequently dominate headlines, generating polarised reactions: on the one hand, they mobilise fervent support among certain segments

of the population; on the other, they elicit widespread rejection and concern. This sustained media visibility fuels a broader dynamic of political polarisation, wherein the discursive frameworks and agendas of PRR actors gain greater diffusion and resonance. In fact, mainstream parties often find themselves engaging in debates set on terms defined by the radical right—or even adopting elements of their rhetoric, particularly in areas such as immigration or public security.

Unsurprisingly, this political prominence has been paralleled by sustained academic interest. Over the past few decades, the PRR has become one of the most intensively studied phenomena in political science. The body of literature seeking to explain the causes, evolution, and impact of PRR parties now exceeds that dedicated to any other party family (Mudde, 2016; Arzheimer, 2018). These parties pose significant challenges to political systems—whether through their influence on government formation and parliamentary dynamics, their impact on the tone and substance of political discourse, their disruption of party competition, or the substantive policy outcomes they help shape (Oñate, 2021).

Some conclusions drawn from this growing body of research have become widely accepted—if not taken for granted—in both academic and public debate. Yet, like most social phenomena, the PRR is multifaceted, context-dependent, and shaped by a combination of structural, institutional, and discursive factors (Ugarte, 2021). Although scholars have identified common features—most notably, a nativist, authoritarian, and populist ideological profile, as defined in Mudde's (2007) classical formulation—each party remains deeply shaped by the specific national context in which it operates. The emergence and consolidation of PRR actors depends heavily on contextual variables, including political history, electoral system design, economic conditions, elite strategies, and patterns of social demand.

1.1.2 Spain and Poland: latecomers to the European PRR family

Both Spain and Poland were, for many years, considered outliers in the European context of PRR mobilisation. Despite a broader continental trend in which radical right parties gained visibility and electoral traction from the 1990s onwards, these two countries were often treated as exceptions—either immune to or structurally incompatible with such developments. This perception of exceptionalism led to their marginalisation in scholarly analyses.

For many years, Spain was considered an anomaly within the European landscape of the PRR. While PRR parties were gaining strength across much of Western Europe during the 1990s and 2000s, Spain appeared immune to this trend. Indeed, the academic literature frequently referred to the notion of "Spanish exceptionalism", often treating it as a marginal case unworthy of sustained theoretical or empirical attention.

This absence was commonly attributed to a combination of historical and structural factors. Chief among these were the enduring legacy of Franco's dictatorship and the nature of the democratic transition, which enabled the traditional conservative right to absorb and neutralise the more radical elements of the electorate. Following the end of the Franco regime (1939–1975), the Spanish radical right encountered significant difficulties in establishing itself within the new democratic order. Elements of the far right oscillated between nostalgia for Francoism and tacit support for authoritarian alternatives. The most prominent example during this period was *Fuerza Nueva* (FN), led by Blas Piñar, a key figure of the old regime. Although FN secured a seat in the 1977 general elections and demonstrated notable mobilisation capacity, it failed to modernise its ideological discourse, remaining anchored in an idealised vision of Francoist authoritarianism. In contrast, other far-right parties in Europe—such as France's *Front National* or Italy's *Movimento Sociale*—were able to adapt more successfully to the post-authoritarian political order.

Fuerza Nueva also failed to construct a modern and stable organisational structure. This weakness was compounded by the rise of *Alianza Popular*, a party that integrated sectors of the Francoist elite and absorbed ideological elements typically associated with the radical right, such as Spanish ultranationalism, authoritarian conservatism, and residual Francoist values. These ideas remained latent within the

new Spanish right, rather than being expressed through autonomous political formations. As Piero Ignazi (1992) observed, the Spanish right succeeded for many years in articulating both moderate conservatism and more radical tendencies within a single party, leaving little room for a viable alternative further to the right. Similarly, historian Xavier Casals argues that *Fuerza Nueva* failed to consolidate as a viable political force after 1978 due to internal fragmentation, lack of strategic vision, and the growing hegemony of the newly emerging People's Party (PP), which captured the so-called "useful vote" of far-right sympathisers and further marginalised radical parties.

Following the collapse of *Fuerza Nueva*, the PRR in Spain entered a prolonged period of political irrelevance. It was not until the early 2000s that explicit attempts were made to emulate the European model of PRR parties, with nativism as their central ideological pillar. However, these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Only a few local-level parties—such as *Plataforma per Catalunya* (PxC) in Catalonia and *España 2000* in the Valencian Community—gained limited visibility but failed to achieve national relevance (Ortiz Baquero, 2022).

This failure is especially notable given the presence of several structural factors that, in other European contexts, contributed to the rise of the PRR—such as the 2008 economic crisis, rising levels of immigration (particularly during the 2000s, when Spain shifted from being a country of emigration to a net recipient of migrants), and increasing political disaffection (particularly in the aftermath of 2011). In Spain, however, the radical right failed to capitalise on these dynamics. Unlike in many other European countries, mainstream parties—including the PP—did not openly exploit xenophobic rhetoric, and cultural or identity-related conflicts linked to immigration were not politicised with comparable intensity.

A further distinctive structural factor was the strong presence of regional nationalist movements—particularly in Catalonia, the Basque Country, and, to a lesser extent, Galicia—which limited the development of a French- or Italian-style national populism. The dominant axis of political competition in Spain remained the centre–periphery cleavage, rather than a straightforward nationalist–cosmopolitan divide.

For decades, it proved difficult to articulate a unifying Spanish nativist discourse at the national level, since the right was simultaneously compelled to confront and negotiate with peripheral nationalist actors (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015).

This complex territorial structure, combined with the strength of subnational identities, hindered the consolidation of a radical right populist actor capable of effectively mobilising around a cohesive national narrative—at least until the Catalan independence crisis (*procés*) in 2017 (Divida, 2022).

These national trajectories changed significantly in the late 2010s. As a result, Spain lacked a significant parliamentary radical right populist party until 2018. This absence was interpreted in the literature as a manifestation of "Spanish exceptionalism", and Spain—alongside Portugal—was repeatedly cited in comparative studies as a major Western European outlier, where no radical right party equivalent to the *Front National*, *Lega*, or the *Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)* had emerged.

While Spain's case has often been framed through the lens of "exceptionalism", Poland followed a distinct yet equally underexplored trajectory—particularly in the post-communist context. Until recently, Poland received relatively limited scholarly attention within the literature on the PRR, especially when compared to neighbouring countries. Throughout the 1990s, it was generally perceived as a relatively stable new democracy, largely devoid of significant extremist or populist forces (Pankowski, 2010). Academic interest tended to focus instead on more prominent cases in the region, such as Hungary (e.g. the rise of *Jobbik*), Russia, or various Balkan states.

During this period, Polish far-right groups occupied only a marginal position in the national political landscape (Pankowski, 2012). While some actors did emerge—most notably Andrzej Lepper's agrarian-populist *Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland* (*Samoobrona*) and the ultraconservative, nationalist-Catholic *League of Polish Families* (*LPR*)—they were largely regarded as idiosyncratic or transitional phenomena, rather than integral components of the broader European PRR wave.

Unlike more enduring parties such as Hungary's *Jobbik*, Romania's *Greater Romania Party*, or Slovakia's *National Party*, neither *Samoobrona* nor *LPR* succeeded in establishing a lasting parliamentary foothold or a consolidated ideological profile. Although both parties briefly entered government in the mid-2000s, their coalition proved short-lived. As one analysis notes, their participation surprised many observers who had long viewed Poland as largely immune to the rise of radical right forces (Pankowski, 2010).

For many years after 1989, Poland appeared to lack a consolidated PRR party of the kind seen elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. One key reason is that the main axis of political competition in Poland's early post-communist period was not centred on immigration or nativism, but rather on divisions over the communist past and the pace of economic reform. The Polish right itself was internally split between pro-Western liberal-democratic conservatives and traditional national-Catholic conservatives. While the latter occasionally produced some radical-right initiatives, none managed to crystallise into a stable PRR party during the 1990s or early 2000s.

Several attempts were made—most prominently the aforementioned *LPR* and *Samoobrona*—but their successes were limited and short-lived. Both parties did achieve significant parliamentary representation in the early 2000s and even became junior coalition partners in a government led by the mainstream conservative party *PiS* from 2005 to 2007. However, this experiment was fleeting: the *PiS–LPR–Samoobrona* coalition collapsed in 2007 amid scandal, and in the subsequent election, both *LPR* and *Samoobrona* failed to win any seats, effectively collapsing as political forces.

Indeed, by late 2007, the Polish PRR had lost its parliamentary representation, underscoring the inability of those early PRR actors to consolidate their position. Subsequently, much of the radical-nationalist electorate—and even elite cadres from *LPR* and *Samoobrona*—were absorbed by *PiS* in the following years, indicating a reconfiguration of the right rather than the persistence of separate far-right parties.

Another factor that long set Poland apart from many Western European contexts was its ethnic and religious homogeneity. Over 95% of Poland's population identifies as ethnically Polish, and the vast majority are Roman Catholics. Due to the tumultuous history of the 20th century—the Holocaust and World War II, post-war border shifts, and the exclusions under communist rule—Poland had virtually no sizeable visible minorities for decades. Traditional minority communities (such as Jews and Germans) were drastically reduced mid-century, and until very recently, non-European immigration to Poland was minimal.

This homogeneity meant that anti-immigrant or anti-minority politics lacked immediate targets and salience for much of the post-1989 period. In contrast to Western Europe's far-right parties, which rallied against growing immigrant

communities, Poland's radical right often fixated on historical or abstract enemies. Common themes in the 1990s included fervent anti-communism and a latent antisemitism "without Jews"—a paradox in which antisemitic tropes persisted despite the very small Jewish population.

Nationalist rhetoric also invoked external adversaries such as Germany or Russia, reflecting historical grievances and security anxieties, and decried the perceived erosion of traditional values by Western secularism. In other words, the Polish far right during the 1990s and early 2000s mobilised against intangible or symbolic threats—the legacy of communism, cosmopolitan liberal influences, and so forth—rather than immigrant communities, because Poland simply did not have large immigrant or ethnic minority groups at the time.

This environment kept classic Western European-style anti-immigrant PRR agendas somewhat muted in Poland for years—a situation that began to shift dramatically around 2015, when Europe's migrant and refugee crisis brought the issue of immigration to the forefront across the EU, including in countries with previously negligible immigrant populations. The so-called "Spanish exceptionalism" (Ribera Payá & Martínez, 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019) was shattered in December 2018, when Vox achieved an unexpected breakthrough in the Andalusian regional elections, winning 12 seats. This result triggered a highly intense electoral cycle, during which several elections were held in rapid succession. In this context, Vox gained representation at the municipal, regional, national, and European levels, quickly establishing itself as a relevant political force and becoming the third most-voted party in the country.

The rise of Vox not only ended the era of Spanish exceptionalism—making Spain, along with Portugal, one of the last Western European countries where the PRR had remained marginal—but also triggered a profound transformation in the ideological landscape of the Spanish right. For much of the post-transition period, the PP had maintained hegemonic dominance within the centre-right. This dominance was briefly challenged by the emergence of Ciudadanos, a liberal-centrist party that won 57 seats in the 2019 general elections. However, it has been Vox that has ultimately consolidated itself as the PP's principal competitor for the right-wing electorate.

Despite its relatively recent emergence, Vox has had a significant impact on Spanish politics, particularly on the discursive strategies and electoral performance

of the PP. In response to Vox's rise, the PP has oscillated between moderation and radicalisation, adjusting its rhetoric according to shifting political and territorial contexts. Moreover, the agreements between the PP and Vox to govern in several autonomous communities have led the Popular Party to adopt part of Vox's agenda, especially regarding issues related to immigration and the reception of underage migrants.

Moreover, Vox's electoral success has contributed to the politicisation of issues that had previously been considered peripheral or were largely taken for granted in public life. Militant Spanish nationalism, the re-centralisation of the territorial model, and nativist and anti-feminist ideologies have gained increasing visibility in the political debate. These topics—once marginal—have become central to political discourse, reshaping the terms of debate and altering the public agenda.

Vox has also played a key role in the activation and legitimisation of ideological predispositions that had long existed in latent form within Spanish public opinion. Attitudes such as opposition to decentralisation, cultural conservatism, and hostility towards immigration had been present for decades, albeit without a credible political outlet. The emergence of Vox as a viable and electorally competitive force provided an institutional channel for these sentiments, making them visible and transforming them into influential actors within the national political field.

While Spain's exceptionalism was defined by the absence of a viable PRR force until 2018, Poland's distinctiveness stemmed from the delayed radicalisation of an initially mainstream conservative party.

In Poland, the situation of "exceptionalism" began to shift with the radicalisation of PiS and its gradual transformation into a PRR party during the second decade of the 2000s. Founded in 2001, PiS was initially classified as a traditional national-conservative or Christian-democratic party—socially conservative and patriotic, but committed to democracy and Poland's EU membership—and not typically labelled as "far right" in its first decade.

Throughout the 2000s, PiS often partnered with respectable centre-right forces in Europe (notably the British Conservatives), joining them in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the European Parliament. This affiliation with mainstream conservative allies meant that PiS was long treated as part of the moderate right and not grouped with Europe's openly radical right

parties. Even as late as the early 2010s, PiS was still viewed by many as akin to "radicalised conservatives" rather than outright far-right extremists.

Over time, especially during the 2010s, PiS underwent a gradual but clear radicalisation of its discourse and agenda. Several developments contributed to this shift. After 2007, when LPR and Samoobrona collapsed, PiS absorbed much of their electorate and many of their activists, effectively bringing more hardline nationalists under its umbrella.

PiS leaders—notably Jarosław Kaczyński—also began to adopt a more stridently populist style. This intensified after 2010, in the aftermath of the tragic Smolensk plane crash (which killed President Lech Kaczyński, Jarosław's twin, among others). Jarosław Kaczyński promoted a nationalist-conspiratorial narrative around the crash and sharpened PiS's anti-elite, anti-Russian, and anti-liberal rhetoric in the years that followed.

By the mid-2010s, PiS had incorporated the hallmarks of PRR ideology: a nativist outlook (championing the ethnic Polish "people" against outsiders), an authoritarian approach to political opponents and institutions, and a populist anti-elite narrative that pitted the virtuous masses against corrupt liberal elites. In effect, PiS consolidated previously fragmented far-right tendencies within its own structure, uniting conservative Catholic social values with an openly xenophobic and anti-pluralist tone. Nevertheless, the classification of *PiS* as a PRR party has been—and, to some extent, continues to be—a subject of debate in Poland. Throughout the 2000s, *PiS* was widely perceived as a mainstream national-conservative party, comparable to Christian-democratic parties with nationalist leanings, rather than as part of the radical right. It cooperated in the European Parliament with respected conservative actors—such as the British Conservatives—through the formation of the *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR) group. This perception likely contributed to an underestimation of *PiS*'s ideological proximity to the PRR.

It was only after the more overt radicalisation of its agenda between 2015 and 2020—characterised by attacks on the rule of law, anti-migrant and anti-LGBT rhetoric, and open confrontation with the EU—that a broader academic consensus began to emerge, classifying *PiS* as part of the European PRR family. By that point, Poland had already become a central reference in the literature on democratic

backsliding and right-wing populism in Europe. However, in earlier phases, conceptual ambiguity surrounding *PiS*'s ideological character resulted in a lack of international studies treating it explicitly as part of the PRR. Much of the scholarship prior to 2015 examined *PiS* through the lens of post-transition politics or as a case of conservative backlash, without connecting it to the broader transnational PRR family (Ślarzynski, 2023).

As previously noted, academic scholarship on the PRR has predominantly focused on cases where these parties achieved notable electoral success, often neglecting contexts in which their emergence was delayed, limited, or previously absent. For many years, both Spain and Poland exemplified this latter scenario, leading to their marginalisation in comparative analyses of the PRR.

These trajectories demonstrate that, despite their delayed inclusion on the European PRR map, both Spain and Poland have become critical cases for rethinking the regional and ideological boundaries of this party family. The selection and comparison of these two contrasting cases not only serve to highlight the differences between the countries and their respective parties but also help to illuminate the underlying factors driving these divergences. In doing so, this analysis underscores the importance of national contexts and reveals the heterogeneity within the European PRR.

1.2 Problem statement

The increasing prominence of PRR parties across Europe has generated an extensive and increasingly sophisticated body of scholarly literature. However, this literature has historically exhibited a marked Western European bias, focusing predominantly on "successful" cases—those in which PRR parties have achieved substantial electoral breakthroughs and exerted significant influence on national politics (Art, 2013; Arzheimer, 2009). During the 1990s and 2000s, scholars such as Hans-Georg Betz, Piero Ignazi, and Cas Mudde developed influential theoretical and comparative frameworks, primarily rooted in Western European experiences. Cases such as the French *Front National*, the Austrian *Freedom Party* (FPÖ), the Italian *Northern League*, and various Nordic formations became paradigmatic for understanding PRR dynamics. These examples served as empirical reference points for theorising patterns of party system disruption, ideological configuration, and demand-side mobilisation.

This Western-centric orientation, however, has resulted in a significant research gap concerning the development and variation of PRR parties in Southern and Eastern Europe—often due to their perceived "immunity" to such formations. Central and Eastern European PRR parties have frequently been treated as analytically distinct, exhibiting *sui generis,* characteristics shaped by specific historical trajectories, post-communist transitions, and patterns of state–society interaction. For many years, these parties were viewed as only moderately successful or confined to marginal protest niches, contributing to their relative neglect within the mainstream comparative literature. Even as several of them gained visibility from the mid-2000s onwards, the prevailing tendency was to question the validity of direct comparisons with their Western European counterparts. While nationalist and populist elements were undoubtedly present in the region, empirical research remained underdeveloped, underscoring the need for more context-sensitive and systematically comparative approaches (Pirro, 2015).

Similarly, countries such as Spain and Poland remained peripheral to the mainstream research agenda on the PRR until relatively recently. In Spain, the enduring legacy of Francoism and the long-standing absence of a viable far-right party contributed to the notion of "Spanish exceptionalism." In Poland, the distinct trajectory of post-communist democratisation and the dominance of transitional

cleavages—particularly those unrelated to nativism or authoritarianism—led to its marginalisation within broader comparative frameworks. It was only with the recent electoral consolidation of *Vox* and *PiS* that both countries emerged as critical cases demanding systematic cross-national analysis. Their ascent challenges established East–West dichotomies and highlights the need for integrated analytical frameworks that can accommodate divergent historical temporalities, institutional configurations, and ideological developments.

Analytically, it is essential to recall that the study of the PRR as a party family is predicated on the identification of shared ideological and organisational features. According to Mudde's (2007) foundational definition, PRR parties are typically characterised by the ideological triad of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. However, the way these components are articulated and translated into programmatic agendas varies markedly across national contexts. These variations are not merely rhetorical or strategic, but structurally embedded in each country's political development, institutional architecture, and opportunity structures.

This dynamic becomes particularly salient when comparing *Vox* and *PiS*. While both parties can be located within the same ideological family and operate within the broader European PRR landscape, their stances on key issues, discursive strategies, and programmatic emphases diverge in important ways. These differences underscore the centrality of national context and historical legacies in shaping how shared ideological components manifest in practice. A comparative analysis of *Vox* and *PiS* thus offers a valuable opportunity to explore how a common ideological repertoire is adapted, reinterpreted, and embedded in distinct sociopolitical environments in contemporary Europe.

1.3 Research aim and goal

This Ph.D thesis aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the PRR in Spain and Poland through the cases of Vox and PiS. It argues that, although both parties belong to the same family and share similar ideological features, they represent distinct expressions of the PRR within the European context. Shaped by different historical legacies and adapted to their respective national settings, PRR parties articulate their principal ideological components in divergent ways. The specific objectives of the study are outlined below:

- To provide a conceptual and taxonomical overview of the PRR, addressing the heterogeneity of terminology and classification that characterises the field, with the aim of establishing a clear, consistent, and theoretically grounded operational definition applicable to the subsequent empirical case of study.
- To conduct a comparative analysis of party system dynamics and political opportunity structures in Spain and Poland, in order to explain how national institutional configurations and historical trajectories have shaped the distinct paths of emergence, radicalisation, and consolidation of the PRR in each case.
- To examine the divergent authoritarian legacies of Spain and Poland and evaluate how these historical trajectories are reflected and rearticulated in the ideological orientations and political projects of Vox and PiS.
- To analyse and compare Vox and PiS as the Spanish and Polish representatives of the PRR, examining how each party articulates its core ideological components- nativism, authoritarianism, and populism- while also exploring complementary programmatic dimension such as Euroscepticism, ruralism, and climate scepticism, in order to assess their ideological profiles within the broader European PRR landscape.
- To analyse and compare the economic agendas of Vox and PiS through the lens of Kitschelt and McGann´s (1995) theory of "winning formulas", with the aim of assessing how both parties articulate their economic positions and determining whether their economic orientation reinforces or contradicts their broader ideological identity.

- To situate Vox and PiS within the broader European PRR party family, by identifying the ideological and strategic factors that both anchor them within this party family and differentiate them from other formations, with the aim of determining which specific parties they most closely resemble in the contemporary European landscape.

1.4 Research hypothesis

This dissertation seeks to explore how Vox (Spain) and PiS (Poland) have developed as distinct expressions of the PRR within their respective national contexts. While both are ideologically anchored in the same party family and share a core ideological triad of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde,2007), they have followed divergent paths of emergence, radicalisation, and institutionalisation. Based on the research problem outlined in previous sections, the following hypotheses guide the empirical and comparative investigation:

- H_0a: Although Vox and PiS belong to the same political family-the PRR- and share common ideological core, they exhibit significantly divergent ideological configurations, discursive strategies, and programmatic agendas.
- H_0b: These ideological and strategic divergences are not merely rhetorical or tactical in nature, but are structurally rooted in the national context, authoritarian legacies, party system dynamics, and political opportunity structure of Spain and Poland, respectively.
- H_0c: Within the broader European PRR party family, Vox and PiS occupy distinct ideological and strategic positions, which reflect regional subtypes.

1.5 Research question

The comparative analysis of Vox and PiS undertaken in this thesis seeks to elucidate how national contexts, historical legacies, and institutional configurations shape the emergence, development, and articulation of PRR politics in Spain and Poland. Although both parties belong to the same political family and share significant ideological features, they represent markedly different expression of the PRR within the European landscape. Based on this premise, this study is guided by the following research questions, which aim to investigate the contextual embeddedness, ideological construction, and comparative positioning of Vox and PiS within the contemporary European PRR landscape:

- How have party system dynamics and political opportunity structures in Spain and Poland influenced the emergence, radicalisation, and institutional consolidation of Vox and PiS?
- To what extent have national contexts and authoritarian legacies in Spain and Poland shaped the ideological configuration, political discourse, and programmatic strategies of Vox and PiS as expressions of the PRR?
- How do Vox and PiS articulate the core ideological features of the PRR—namely nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—in their political programmes and discursive repertoires, and which of these dimensions are most central in each case?
- How do Vox and PiS position themselves on complementary ideological dimensions such as Euroscepticism, rural identity, and climate policy, and what role do these elements play in shaping their broader ideological profile?
- How do Vox and PiS differ in their approaches to economic policy, and what do these differences reveal about the internal heterogeneity of the PRR party family?
- What patterns of ideological, economic, and organisational variation characterise the European PRR, and how can these be systematically classified within a comparative framework?

- How can Vox and PiS be situated within the broader PRR party family in Europe, and with which parties do they share the highest degrees of ideological and strategic affinity?

1.6 Research methods and design

This research adopts a methodological approach designed to test the hypotheses formulated and to address both the overarching research objective and the specific research questions. Analytically, the study follows a confirmatory design, aimed at empirically validating hypotheses derived from a pre-established theoretical framework. Confirmatory research assumes that the phenomenon under investigation has already been subject to extensive conceptual development, theoretical reflection, and empirical analysis, thereby enabling the systematic testing of its underlying assumptions.

While this study adopts a predominantly deductive and confirmatory approach, grounded in established theoretical models and standardised empirical indicators, it also acknowledges the dynamic nature of party ideologies and the potential for variation and hybridisation within the PRR family. Accordingly, the methodological design is sensitive to both patterns that align with theoretical expectations and those that diverge from them. This reflects a moderately reflexive an open epistemological stance, which is essential when engaging with complex and evolving political phenomena.

In this context, the nature of the research objectives is inherently confirmatory, insofar as the study seeks to verify the validity of the main hypothesis through a comparative and systematic analysis. As a first step, the thesis defines the core ideological features of PRR parties—namely, nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—in order to construct an operational epistemological framework applicable to the selected case studies: Vox in Spain and PiS in Poland. This framework is further extended to other political formations included in the broader comparative analysis. Based on this conceptual foundation, the research adopts a deductive methodology with empirical verification, drawing on pre-established PRR categories to assess whether the parties under scrutiny conform to the

ideological and strategic patterns that characterise the PRR family, while also identifying internal differentiation—both between and within these formations.

As a first step, and with the aim of providing a rigorous conceptual definition of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as selecting the most appropriate analytical category with which to classify the political formations under study, the thesis undertakes an exhaustive review of the specialised literature on the extreme right, radical right, and PRR. This review constitutes the core of the theoretical framework and is organised into several sections. These examine on the one hand, the principal taxonomical debates surrounding the phenomenon, and on the other hand, the terminological evolution it has undergone since the end of the Second World War, with particular attention to the two dominant labels used in contemporary academic literature to describe these parties.

In order to select a precise and analytically robust terminology and to establish a coherent epistemological framework to guide the empirical analysis, the thesis further develops the conceptualisation of the PRR, with special attention paid to its defining ideological components. In addition, an economic dimension—often marginalised in the literature—is incorporated as a complementary analytical axis, given its growing relevance in explaining intra-family variation within the PRR.

Regarding the methodological techniques employed, a systematic literature review has been conducted, with particular emphasis on the work of Cas Mudde (2007), whose theoretical model has been adopted as the principal epistemological reference for the classification of the cases analysed. Concerning the economic dimension, special attention is paid to the theory of "winning formulas" proposed by Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony J. McGann (1995), which offers a comparative framework for categorising PRR parties based on their position on the economic left–right spectrum and understanding their ideological strategies accordingly.

Secondly, with the aim of analysing the evolution of party systems in Spain and Poland since the establishment of their respective democratic regimes—as well as the emergence and subsequent consolidation of Vox and PiS within these contexts—this thesis adopts a perspective grounded in the supply-side approach. This analytical framework examines how political opportunity structures, party system dynamics, and institutional configurations shape the conditions for the rise and entrenchment of PRR parties. The supply-side perspective is further

complemented by a historical-institutionalist approach, which considers how the legacies of authoritarian rule, processes of democratic transition, and patterns of institutional development in each country have influenced the ideological positioning and strategic decisions of Vox and PiS.

Methodologically, an extensive review of academic literature has been conducted, focusing on the Spanish and Polish political systems as well as on the specific trajectories of Vox and PiS. In addition, official electoral data have been collected from the Spanish Ministry of the Interior and the National Electoral Commission of Poland, in order to examine in detail, the electoral performance of both parties and that of other relevant actors within each national party system. These data have made it possible to contextualise the rise of Vox and PiS, trace their electoral trajectories, and evaluate their impact on the transformation of national party systems. All data have been systematically processed and visualised in a series of original tables and figures, facilitating their comparative analysis in the empirical chapters of this dissertation.

Thirdly, in order to understand the ideological foundations and the doctrinal evolution of Vox and PiS from their inception to the present day—and to conduct a rigorous analysis of their political discourse—this thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining the use of primary sources, quantitative secondary data, and specialised academic literature.

First, a qualitative content analysis has been conducted based on a broad corpus of official primary documents produced by both parties. These include electoral programmes, party statutes, congressional documents, institutional communications, press releases, and public speeches delivered by key party leaders. Additionally, relevant academic literature addressing the trajectory, ideology, and strategy of both parties has been consulted to contextualise the empirical data and to enhance the interpretive framework of the analysis.

Second, a longitudinal quantitative analysis has been carried out using data from the CHES (Jolly et al. 2022; Rovny et al.,2024), covering the survey waves available between 2002 and 2024. For Vox, the analysis relies on the only two waves in which the party is coded (2019 and 2024). For PiS, the analysis spans eight waves (2002–2024). This approach makes it possible to trace patterns of continuity and change in the ideological positioning of both parties across multiple dimensions.

To assess the nativist dimension, five indicators have been selected, all coded on a scale from 0 to 10: *Immigration Policy* (position on immigration), *Multiculturalism* (stance on the integration of immigrants and asylum seekers), *Nationalism* (position on the cosmopolitanism–nationalism axis), *Ethnic Minorities* (stance on the rights of ethnic minorities), and *Anti-Islam Rhetoric* (extent of anti-Islamic rhetoric in the party's discourse).

With regard to the authoritarian dimension, six variables have been employed, also coded on a 0 to 10 scale: *Galtan* (general position on democratic freedoms and civil liberties), *Civil Liberties vs Law and Order* (preference for public order over civil rights), *Religious Principles in Politics* (role of religion in politics), *Support for Women's Rights*, *Support for LGBT+ Rights*, and *Same-Sex Marriage* (stance on marriage equality).

The populist dimension has been operationalised using three additional indicators: *Corruption Salience* (importance attributed to corruption), *People vs Elite* (people–elite antagonism), and *Anti-Elite Salience* (centrality of anti-establishment rhetoric). All three are coded on a 0 to 10 scale, in accordance with CHES methodology.

In addition, the analysis incorporates a set of complementary ideological dimensions to refine the overall ideological profile of each party. The following variables have been selected: *EU Position* (general stance on European integration, coded on a 1 to 7 scale), *EU Salience* (importance assigned to European issues), *Environment* (preference for economic growth versus environmental protection), *Climate Change* (importance given to climate policy), *Urban–Rural Interests* (emphasis on rural versus urban interests), and *Protectionism* (attitude towards trade liberalisation). With the exception of *EU Position*, all of these variables are measured on a 0 to 10 scale.

Finally, to assess the economic profile of both parties, six additional indicators have been included: *Economic Left–Right* (general position on the economic spectrum), *Position on Redistribution* (attitude toward fiscal redistribution), *Salience of Redistribution* (importance assigned to redistributive issues), *Public Services vs Tax Cuts* (preference for public spending versus tax reduction), *Deregulation* (support for economic liberalisation), and *Protectionism* (support for protectionist versus free-market trade policies). All these variables are coded on a 0 to 10 scale, where

higher values reflect a stronger orientation towards economic liberalism, fiscal conservatism, or economic nationalism, depending on the specific dimension.

All processed quantitative data have been presented in a series of comparative tables and original graphs, which make it possible to trace the evolution of both parties across the various ideological dimensions analysed, as well as to conduct cross-sectional comparisons with other formations within the European PRR.

Finally, to address the last objective of this research—namely, to situate Vox and PiS within the broader European PRR party family, by identifying the ideological and strategic factors that anchor them within this political constellation, as well as those that differentiate them from other formations, with the aim of determining which parties they most closely resemble in the contemporary European landscape—a quantitative analysis has been conducted using secondary data from the 2024 CHES.

In the first phase of the analysis, European political parties classified as PRR in the CHES dataset were identified. Key variables were then selected to capture their general ideological positioning (*lrgen*), their economic orientation (*lrecon*), and their defining dimensions—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. The latter three were constructed as composite indices, based on multiple CHES items, following the same operational procedure developed in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis. Additionally, the most recent results from national and European elections were incorporated for each party, in order to contextualise their electoral weight. This approach enables the mapping of the internal diversity within the European PRR, and the classification of its national variants based on standardised empirical criteria.

To visually represent the ideological positioning of these parties, a three-dimensional scatterplot was constructed using three key dimensions: nativism (X-axis), authoritarianism (Y-axis), and populism (bubble size). The values for nativism and authoritarianism were calculated as composite indices on a 0–10 scale, combining CHES variables that measure attitudes towards immigration, law and order, traditional moral values, and civil liberties. The populism dimension was also aggregated into a single index and visualised through the proportional size of each bubble.

To divide the graph into four analytical quadrants, the mean values of nativism (≈8.7) and authoritarianism (≈8.0) across the dataset were used as reference lines. This allows for the comparative analysis of ideological subprofiles within the PRR party family. The resulting visualisation thus facilitates the examination of the internal heterogeneity of the European PRR in 2024, as well as the identification of emerging regional and ideological patterns.

The same procedure was applied to jointly analyse the economic and authoritarian dimensions of the parties, drawing on the theoretical framework of Kitschelt and McGann's (1995) "winning formulas". In this case, the horizontal axis represents the general economic orientation (*lrecon*), the vertical axis retains the composite authoritarianism index, and the bubble size once again reflects the level of nativism. Reference lines were drawn based on the mean scores for economic orientation (≈6.2) and authoritarianism (≈8.01), dividing the scatterplot into four analytical quadrants that allow for the classification of parties according to strategic variants—such as liberal–authoritarian or interventionist–authoritarian. This visualisation provides a means of identifying distinct ideological and strategic subtypes within the PRR party family, in line with the *winning formulas* framework.

Finally, to position Vox and PiS within these comparative frameworks, the same methods were applied. Two scatterplots were constructed: one focusing on the relationship between nativism and authoritarianism, and the other on the relationship between economic orientation and authoritarianism. Using the dataset's mean values as reference points, Vox and PiS were each located within distinct quadrants. Based on this classification, a selection of European PRR parties sharing the same ideological and strategic quadrant as each case was made, and specific visualisations were developed to facilitate the identification of similarities and divergences. Lastly, an in-depth comparative analysis was conducted between Vox, PiS and the selected parties, focusing on specific subdimensions of nativism, authoritarianism, and economic orientation, in accordance with the indicators previously defined in Chapters 4 and 5.

1.7 Research contribution

This study offers a threefold contribution to the academic literature on the PRR: conceptual, empirical, and methodological.

First, it seeks to provide a conceptual and taxonomical clarification of the PRR, thereby addressing the considerable heterogeneity of terminology and classification that continues to characterise the field. In line with the broader objective of the thesis—to establish a clear and operational definition of the PRR that is both theoretically grounded and empirically applicable—this research synthesises and critically engages with existing scholarly frameworks. It refines the conceptual contours of the PRR in a manner that enables consistent application across case studies, with reference to the empirical analysis of Vox and PiS. In doing so, it contributes to definitional precision within PRR scholarship and offers a robust analytical foundation for cross-national comparison.

Second, and more substantively, this dissertation addresses a persistent gap in the literature by undertaking a comparative analysis of the PRR in both Western and Eastern Europe—specifically, in the underexplored national contexts of Spain and Poland. These two countries, long regarded as exceptional or resistant to PRR mobilisation, have in recent years produced highly relevant cases: the rise of Vox and the consolidation of PiS as a governing party from 2015 to 2023. Their respective trajectories challenge the assumption that the PRR is a phenomenon confined to specific regions or historical legacies, offering a fertile ground for re-examining established theoretical explanations concerning the emergence, radicalisation, and institutionalisation of the PRR across Europe.

Spain and Poland also share key structural parallels, having each undergone transitions from authoritarian rule—Francoism in the Spanish case and communism in the Polish case—to liberal democratic governance. These transitions, marked by deep political and social upheaval, continue to shape their contemporary political cultures, institutional arrangements, and ideological cleavages. The comparison between the two thus enables a more nuanced examination of how authoritarian legacies and democratisation pathways influence the articulation of PRR ideology.

Both Vox and PiS exhibit the core ideological features of the PRR: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Additionally, both parties embrace other common features of this party family, including pronounced Euroscepticism, anti-

communism, and social conservatism— particularly in matters relating to gender, sexuality, and morality—as well as climate scepticism and the defence of rural traditional values. However, the manner in which these ideological components are articulated differs substantially, reflecting divergent national histories, political opportunity structures, and symbolic repertoires. Vox's discourse is shaped by the legacy of Spanish nationalism, the memory of Francoism, and enduring tensions surrounding regional autonomy—most notably the Catalan independence movement. PiS, by contrast, is rooted in Poland's post-communist transformation, state centralism, a close alignment with the Catholic Church, and a moralised conception of national identity. Crucially, while PiS exercised executive power from 2015 to 2023—enabling it to reshape state institutions and translate its ideological programme into concrete policy—Vox has remained in opposition, without direct access to national government. These differences underscore how shared ideological components can acquire distinct forms and functions depending on context-specific institutional dynamics, party system configurations, and historical legacies.

By adopting a comparative lens, this research helps to bridge the enduring divide in PRR scholarship between Western and Eastern Europe. Much of the literature remains regionally siloed, with Western European and post-communist cases examined in isolation, reflecting divergent trajectories of party development, regime type, and identity formation. However, the growing relevance of PRR parties across both regions suggests the need for a more integrated and cross-regional framework of analysis. Comparing Spain and Poland allows for the identification of both common explanatory factors and regionally specific dynamics of mobilisation, legitimation, and radicalisation.

Third, and crucially, this thesis responds to a methodological gap in the literature by proposing an empirically grounded operational framework for the comparative study of PRR parties. It combines discourse analysis, programmatic evaluation, and expert survey data—particularly from the CHES (Jolly et al. 2022, 2024), —to assess both the core ideological triad and complementary dimensions (such as economic positioning, ruralism, and Euroscepticism). This approach allows for the identification of intra-family variation and regional subtypes within the PRR and offers a replicable analytical model for future cross-national and intra-family

comparisons. It provides a conceptually cohesive and empirically robust framework for understanding how PRR parties emerge, evolve, and adapt across heterogeneous democratic settings.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

This thesis work consists of six chapters:

- Chapter 1 explains the background of the research, presents the research objectives, questions, and hypotheses, and their relevant contribution to the research.
- Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical framework of the dissertation by reviewing the main debates surrounding political extremism and the ideological foundations of the PRR. It clarifies key conceptual distinctions and traces the evolution of the PRR. The chapter also explores the economic heterogeneity of the PRR, revisiting the concept of the "winning formula" to analyse the economic agenda of the PRR.
- Chapter 3 examines the evolution of party systems in Spain and Poland, focusing on how institutional configurations and political opportunity structures have shaped the emergence and consolidation of Vox and PiS.
- Chapter 4 analyses Vox as the Spanish expression of the PRR, focusing on how the party articulates the core ideological dimensions of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. It also examines complementary programmatic elements—such as Euroscepticism, ruralism, and climate scepticism—that reinforce Vox's ideological profile and broaden its appeal within the PRR family. Finally, the chapter evaluates the party's economic agenda through the lens of Kitschelt and McGann's *winning formulas*.
- Chapter 5 analyses PiS as the Polish expression of the PRR, focusing on how the party articulates the core ideological dimensions of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. It also examines complementary programmatic elements—such as Euroscepticism, ruralism, and climate scepticism—that reinforce PiS's ideological profile and broaden its appeal within the PRR family. Finally, the chapter evaluates the party's economic agenda through the lens of Kitschelt and McGann's *winning formulas*.

- Chapter 6 situates Vox and PiS within the broader landscape of the PRR party family. Identifying all the formations that constitute this highly heterogeneous political family, it explores intra-family variation across key ideological dimensions of the PRR and seeks to identify the parties most closely aligned with Vox and PiS.
- Lastly, Chapter 7 provides a conclusion based on the empirical investigation according to the formulated research questions. This chapter closes the study with a reflection on the contributions of this work, as well as on the limitations of the study and its implications for future research.

Chapter 2. Theoretical foundations and conceptual framework

This chapter is divided into four sections. It examines the key theoretical foundations and principal debates that have shaped the study of political extremism, with particular emphasis on the ideological dimensions underpinning each major conceptualisation. It further explores how these debates have progressively clarified the phenomenon, refined its theoretical contours, and contributed to the classification of what is now widely recognised as one of the most significant and influential party families in contemporary European politics: PRR.

The final section addresses the programmatic heterogeneity of PRR parties in the economic domain. It revisits the concept of the "winning formula" and analyses how PRR formations have positioned themselves across the economic spectrum, highlighting the extent to which their economic agendas are strategically shaped by—and subordinated to—their core ideological commitments.

The conceptual framework developed in this chapter will serve as the analytical foundation for the empirical comparison of *Vox* and *PiS* in subsequent chapters.

2.1 Theoretical framework: conceptualising the PRR

Forty years after the emergence of the so-called third wave of extremism in Europe (von Beyme, 1988), a consensus on the definition and classification of this phenomenon remains elusive. Theoretical and terminological confusion—aptly characterised by Mudde (1996) as a "war of words"—continues to pervade the literature, often hindering its development and giving rise to protracted and circular debates.

Where any broad agreement does exist, it lies in the recognition that extremism constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon—typical of many concepts within the social sciences—which manifests in diverse forms depending on the temporal and contextual conditions in which it arises and evolves. It is precisely this polymorphic nature that underpins the divergent use of terminology among scholars, as well as the variation in the definitions accompanying each term. The issue, therefore, is not merely semantic. The conceptual boundaries attributed to terms determine which political formations are included in—or excluded from—the family of parties they

seek to describe. Moreover, the scope and application of each term often vary considerably from one researcher to another (Jaraíz et al., 2021).

Paradoxically, this ongoing taxonomic debate has also enriched the field, stimulating a proliferation of theoretical and methodological approaches (Arzheimer, 2018).

2.1.1The taxonomic debate: navigating conceptual heterogeneity

The complex nature of this political phenomenon—variously referred to as the far right, radical right populism, or the extreme right, depending on the analytical perspective—has prompted considerable scholarly efforts aimed at definitional clarification. These efforts seek to distinguish the phenomenon from other, related political currents. Yet, far from a settled consensus, the literature remains marked by what some authors have described as a "terminological war" (de Lange, 2008; Mudde, 1996). At times, this terminological dispute has generated circular and arguably sterile debates, overly preoccupied with normative questions rather than advancing substantive knowledge about the phenomenon's effects and interactions with broader socio-political processes. Nonetheless, a more optimistic reading is also possible: this ongoing theoretical and conceptual debate has arguably enriched and strengthened the academic field dedicated to its study.

In recent decades, the emergence and subsequent consolidation of numerous political formations exhibiting clear ideological and stylistic affinities has generated a pressing need for a term capable of adequately defining, describing, and classifying this phenomenon. Scholarly engagement has thus been characterised by a wide range of approaches, resulting in a dense and often contested terminological landscape.

A diverse array of terms has been employed to describe these parties and movements. Political scientists, historians, and sociologists have variously used labels such as anti-immigrant, nativism, reactionary tribalism, ethnonationalism, extreme right, far right, new right, and different permutations of radical, right, and populism—including PRR, radical right, radical right-wing populism, and right-wing populism. In addition, numerous derivative terms have proliferated, such as exclusionary populism, national populism, neo-populism, new populism, and

xenophobic populism (Mudde, 2007). The list is so extensive that it would be nearly impossible to catalogue all existing variations.

This proliferation of terminology poses a significant challenge, particularly because many of these studies refer to the same or closely related phenomena. Rather than clarifying the subject matter, the use of such a wide variety of labels may obscure important distinctions and conceptual boundaries. Many of these terms capture only partial dimensions of the phenomenon, and their reductionist character risks distorting its multifaceted nature. As such, caution is warranted—and some scholars argue that certain labels should be abandoned altogether (Lerín Ibarra, 2022).

Labels invoking historical fascism—such as *fascists*, *neo-fascists*, *Nazis*, or *neo-Nazis*—also merit scepticism when applied to contemporary radical right parties. Although frequently invoked in media discourse, social media, and political debate, such terms offer limited analytical value. As Jason Stanley (2020) argues in *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, the concept of fascism has, in recent years, been increasingly stripped of its historical and theoretical substance, and is often deployed more as a rhetorical insult than as a meaningful analytical category.

Until relatively recently, the term *extreme right* dominated both academic and political discourse—particularly during the 1960s and 1970s—as the primary label used to describe this political phenomenon. However, at that time, its application was largely spatial and descriptive, functioning similarly to expressions such as *centre-right* or *far left*, and lacking in analytical rigour. Rather than serving as a conceptual tool for unpacking the organisational structures or ideological content of these formations, it primarily indicated their position within the political spectrum.

The limited body of scholarly work that addressed the extreme right in the post-1945 period tended to interpret it through the conceptual frameworks of *neo-fascism* or *neo-Nazism*, often drawing on the intellectual legacy of interwar fascism studies (e.g. Del Boca & Giovana, 1969; Wilkinson, 1995). These early analyses were predominantly historical and typological in nature, grounded in the assumption of a linear continuity between classical fascism and the emerging far-right formations.

The 1980s marked a pivotal turning point in the academic treatment of the PRR. The emergence and consolidation of new political formations across Western Europe—often interpreted as part of the "silent counter-revolution", a term coined

by Piero Ignazi (1992), and shaped by rising unemployment, increased immigration, and widespread disillusionment with mainstream political alternatives—generated renewed scholarly attention, particularly in relation to their ideological content and organisational characteristics. Klaus von Beyme (1988) described this as the "third wave" of post-war far-right mobilisation, driven by parties entering national parliaments for the first time. Von Beyme introduced the term *extreme right* to refer to these formations, recognising both its heuristic value and its limitations.

The conceptual preoccupation with achieving definitional clarity intensified during the 1990s, in response to the growing visibility of new political actors on the far-right spectrum—most notably the *Front National* (France), the *Northern League* (Italy), the *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPÖ), and *Vlaams Blok* (later *Vlaams Belang*) in Belgium. These developments, particularly salient in Western Europe, catalysed a resurgence of scholarly interest and prompted a significant shift in analytical focus.

This shift was marked by two influential monographs that laid the foundations for contemporary research on the PRR. Hans-Georg Betz's *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (1994) provided a key contribution by highlighting the centrality of populist rhetoric and anti-immigration discourse to the appeal of these parties. Betz interpreted their success as a reaction to the socio-cultural transformations of Western democracies and the perceived failure of mainstream parties to address citizens' concerns.

Similarly, Herbert Kitschelt's *The Radical Right in Western Europe* (1997)—one of the most influential studies on the subject—offered an in-depth analysis of the internal characteristics of these parties, including their ideological roots, organisational structures, electoral strategies, and positioning in relation to mainstream conservative actors. Kitschelt proposed a typology that distinguished between chauvinist, neo-fascist, new radical right, and anti-statist populist formations, thereby advancing a more nuanced understanding of the heterogeneity within the radical right.

Both authors drew on earlier theoretical insights—most notably those of Daniel Bell on the American radical right (Bell, 1963)—and played a foundational role in consolidating the academic field. Their work emphasised the internal diversity of

the radical right party family and demonstrated how many of these formations diverged both from traditional conservatism and from the rigid ideological frameworks associated with historical right-wing extremism. Collectively, these contributions inaugurated a new stream of scholarship focused on the novelty of these parties and the socio-political conditions that enabled their ascent (Arzheimer, 2018).

One of the most significant contributions to the conceptual debate was made by Piero Ignazi (1992, 2003), who introduced a critical distinction within the political space to the right of the mainstream centre-right. Ignazi differentiated between two principal currents: first, the traditional extreme right, which maintains an explicit ideological link with fascist traditions—characterised by palingenetic, ethnicist, ultranationalist, and anti-liberal elements; and second, the post-industrial or "new" extreme right, which either lacks, or only tenuously retains, connections to historical fascism.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholarly research on the PRR became increasingly comparative and qualitatively oriented, with a growing focus on supply-side dynamics (Ignazi, 2003; Coenders, Lubbers, Gijsberts & Scheepers, 2008; Carter, 2005; Arzheimer, 2006; Rydgren, 2005; Norris, 2009). This literature examined the internal characteristics of PRR parties—including their ideological profiles, organisational structures, leadership styles, and strategic positioning—thus moving beyond demand-side explanations to explore the agency and innovation of the parties themselves.

Within the broader conceptual debate on classification and labelling, the question of terminology has generated sustained scholarly disagreement. De Lange and Mudde (2005) famously described this as a "war of words", highlighting divergent views over how best to define and delimit the radical right. Foundational contributions to this debate have come from von Beyme (1988), Ignazi (1992, 2003), Mudde (1996, 2007, 2019), and Norris (2009), with Cas Mudde emerging as one of the most influential voices in shaping the field's theoretical and terminological contours.

A further milestone in the field was the publication of Cas Mudde's seminal monograph *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (2007). In its opening chapter, Mudde introduced a refined typology of the PRR, marking a departure from his

earlier work (Mudde, 1996) by laying a more robust conceptual foundation for differentiation within the far right. The Dutch scholar adopted the term *populist radical right* to designate these formations—a label that will be examined in greater detail later in this thesis. This typology aimed to enhance conceptual clarity and establish a more coherent and systematic hierarchy among the diverse labels used in the literature (Arzheimer, 2018).

In his subsequent work, Mudde (2019) proposed an even broader classificatory framework by introducing the category of the *far right* as an umbrella term encompassing both the extreme right and the (populist) radical right. This approach has further shaped academic debates, offering a more inclusive structure that acknowledges both ideological overlap and internal diversity within the far-right spectrum.

2.1.2 The extreme right and the populist radical right: two distinct party families

Despite their historical and ideological affinities, the extreme right and the PRR should be understood as distinct party families within the broader landscape of far-right politics (Goodwin, 2007). Establishing a clear conceptual demarcation between them is essential for analytical precision, as each exhibit unique ideological profiles, strategic repertoires, and patterns of electoral development.

2.1.2.1 The extreme right

The ideological foundations of the extreme right lie predominantly in fascism—a syncretic doctrine that amalgamates various anti-democratic elements drawn from both left- and right-wing traditions. Fascist movements emerged in response to the profound political and socio-economic upheavals that followed the First World War, including the collapse of the liberal state in Italy, the Great Depression in Germany, and the broader erosion of classical liberalism across Europe.

Fascism first materialised in Italy with the founding of the Fasci di Combattimento in March 1919. This ideological model was subsequently radicalised in Germany through the rise of National Socialism. While German National Socialism retained many core tenets of Italian fascism, it introduced a far more explicit focus on racial purity and antisemitism. Between 1919 and 1945, fascist movements proliferated across a range of authoritarian regimes in Europe, often under the direct or indirect

influence of Mussolini and Hitler, who actively promoted such movements to advance the geopolitical objectives of the Axis powers.

During this period, several European countries witnessed the formation of fascist or fascist-inspired movements. In Romania, the *Legion of the Archangel Michael* was founded in 1927 and later evolved into the *Iron Guard* in 1940. In Portugal, the *União Nacional*, established in 1930, became the sole legal party under Salazar's dictatorship. Austria entered an authoritarian phase when Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss governed by decree from 1932 to 1934, with the support of the nationalist paramilitary group *Heimwehr*. In Spain, fascism took root with the creation of the *Falange Española* in 1933, founded by José Antonio Primo de Rivera and later merged with the *Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista* (JONS). Following General Francisco Franco's military uprising and the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), Falangism became the official state ideology of the Francoist regime. Similarly, in Greece, Ioannis Metaxas established the *Freethinkers' Party* in 1922 and, upon becoming Prime Minister in 1936, instituted the authoritarian *4th of August Regime*.

Other fascist-inspired movements emerged in Belgium (*Rexism*), the Netherlands (*National Socialist Movement*), Norway (*Nasjonal Samling*), Sweden (*National Socialist Workers' Party*), and Denmark (*National Socialist Movement*). However, these parties generally lacked the institutional depth and political autonomy of their counterparts in Germany, Italy, or Spain, and were often more directly shaped by ideological and material support from foreign regimes—especially those of Mussolini and Hitler (Olascoaga, 2018).

The defeat of fascism in 1945 marked a turning point, pushing these movements to the political margins. A small number of loyalists continued to operate on the fringes of political life, often under the label of *neo-fascists*. These individuals and groups typically remained ideologically consistent with classical fascism, offering little in the way of doctrinal innovation. Rather than gaining electoral traction, they focused on maintaining social networks and commemorative activities, often venerating individuals regarded as "heroes" or "martyrs" of the fascist cause. A notable exception was the *Italian Social Movement* (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*, MSI), founded and led by former Fascist official Giorgio Almirante. The MSI

secured parliamentary representation in 1948 and remained politically active until its transformation into the post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* in 1995 (Mudde, 2019).

Since the 1980s, the term *extreme right* has often been used interchangeably with *neo-fascism*, reflecting the ideological continuity between historical fascist doctrines and their contemporary iterations. These parties are typically characterised by a nostalgic glorification of the interwar period and an idealised vision of national grandeur, often accompanied by historical revisionism. Their ideological discourse centres on the symbolic resurrection of an ethnically homogeneous and powerful nation-state, rooted in a mythologised imperial or nationalist past.

Contemporary extreme right parties conceive of the nation as a native and exclusive ethnic community. While they generally do not advocate for the systematic extermination of minorities—as was the case under German National Socialism—they nonetheless promote exclusionary policies, including the expulsion of both legal and undocumented immigrants, and exhibit overt hostility towards marginalised groups such as the Roma and LGBTQ+ communities (Olascoaga, 2018). The racial dimension of national identity remains a central feature, with many of these parties advancing a triadic conception of nationhood, ethnicity, and race in support of a monoracial state.

In addition to their ethnonationalism, extreme right parties uphold authoritarian principles, advocating for a rigidly ordered society. They reject liberal democracy and seek to dismantle representative institutions and political pluralism, favouring instead an authoritarian or even totalitarian regime. Their rhetoric often emphasises the need for decisive, centralised leadership to enforce national cohesion and restore social order—typically at the expense of individual rights and democratic freedoms.

Despite the persistence of these ideological frameworks, extreme right parties currently occupy a marginal position in most European countries, with little or no parliamentary representation.

2.1.2.2 The Populist radical right

The PRR represents the most electorally successful strand within the broader far-right movement, having moved from the political periphery to occupy a central position in European politics. At the core of its ideological and political discourse lies the nation, with the ultimate goal being the construction of a state based on a singular, homogeneous national identity. Unlike the extreme right—which often insists on racial purity—the radical right has generally eschewed explicit references to "race" in favour of ethnic nationalism, or *ethnonationalism*. Within this framework, national belonging is defined by a shared set of cultural traits, such as language, religion, and historical memory. In pursuit of a unified and culturally cohesive nation, PRR parties reject elements perceived as threats to national identity—particularly immigration, which they frame as an invasive force undermining social and cultural homogeneity (Lerín Ibarra, 2022).

However, PRR formations tend to direct their hostility primarily towards irregular immigration and so-called "criminal" legal migrants, while sometimes expressing conditional acceptance of foreigners and ethnic minorities deemed willing to integrate into the host society (Olascoaga, 2018). Nonetheless, there is no unified stance on the feasibility or limits of assimilation. Some parties advocate a narrow view, asserting that only "culturally proximate" groups—such as fellow Europeans—can fully assimilate (e.g. becoming German or Hungarian), while others contend that certain cultural or religious identities, particularly Islam, are inherently incompatible with Western societies (Mudde, 2019).

PRR parties are also typically characterised by a pronounced authoritarianism, understood as a belief in a tightly ordered society in which breaches of authority are met with severe sanctions. This tendency is reflected in policy proposals advocating tougher immigration laws, stricter criminal justice policies, and the reinforcement of traditional moral norms in the public sphere. Crucially, this authoritarian inclination does not necessarily imply support for dictatorship; rather, it signals a commitment to law, order, and cultural discipline. While PRR parties often accept the procedural mechanisms of democracy, they tend to reject core liberal democratic principles such as minority rights, the rule of law, and the separation of powers. In this respect, the radical right advances a majoritarian and

exclusionary conception of democracy that stands in opposition to the pluralistic ethos of liberalism (Mudde, 2019).

Within the broader radical right tradition, the PRR has emerged as its most successful and ideologically consolidated expression. Its ideological core rests on three interrelated components: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.

The electoral rise of the PRR began in the 1980s (See Table 1), fuelled by widespread economic insecurity, growing disillusionment with mainstream parties, and intensifying anxieties over immigration. Initially marginal, these parties gradually began to gain parliamentary footholds. In Belgium, *Vlaams Blok* (VB) won its first seat in 1978; the Dutch *Centre Party* entered parliament in 1982; and in 1986, France's *Front National* (FN) secured 9.6% of the vote, translating into thirty-five parliamentary seats (Mudde, 2019).

During the same period, Austria's *Freedom Party* (FPÖ)—originally founded by former Nazi affiliates in 1956—underwent a significant ideological transformation. By 1986, it had achieved 9.7% of the national vote. In Switzerland, the *Swiss People's Party* (*SVP/UDC*) began consolidating its presence at the national level. These early successes signalled the gradual normalisation and institutionalisation of the PRR across Western Europe.

By the early 1990s, most European countries had at least one PRR party contesting elections on a regular basis. While many remained within the 5–10% electoral range, others achieved more substantial breakthroughs. In 1995, the FN garnered 15% in the French presidential election; Italy's *Lega Nord* entered government in 1994; Belgium's rebranded *Vlaams Belang* captured 10% of the Flemish vote; and the FPÖ expanded its support to 22.5% by 1994.

Throughout the 2000s, the PRR became the dominant ideological force on the European far right. In France, the *Front National* (FN) reached new heights under Jean-Marie and later Marine Le Pen, culminating in the former's qualification for the second round of the 2002 presidential election. In the Netherlands, the *Party for Freedom* (PVV), founded in 2006 by Geert Wilders, exerted significant pressure on migration and EU integration agendas. In Switzerland, the *Swiss People's Party* (SVP/UDC) led a series of successful anti-immigration campaigns, becoming the country's largest federal party by the end of the decade. In Scandinavia, parties such as the *Norwegian Progress Party*, *Sweden Democrats*, and *True Finns* gained

increasing electoral traction and gradually consolidated their parliamentary presence.

Meanwhile, in Central and Eastern Europe, PRR formations also expanded their influence. Hungary's *Fidesz* stands as a paradigmatic case: founded as a liberal youth party, it underwent a sharp nationalist turn under Viktor Orbán and secured a parliamentary supermajority in 2010. Elsewhere in the region, other parties institutionalised their role in national politics. In Bulgaria, *Ataka*—established in 2005—played a pivotal role in parliamentary negotiations, while Slovakia's *ĽSNS* entered parliament in 2010, though it remained excluded from governing coalitions.

The 2010s witnessed a marked expansion and normalisation of PRR politics across Europe. These parties became dominant actors in several national governments and influential players in the European Parliament. Their discourse—centred on immigration, sovereignty, and national identity—increasingly shaped the agendas of mainstream parties. The traditional *cordon sanitaire* that had previously isolated PRR parties began to erode, although this process unfolded unevenly across EU member states.

Notable examples include the rebranded *Rassemblement National* (RN) in France, Italy's *Lega* under Matteo Salvini, Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), Poland's PiS, and Hungary's *Fidesz*—all of which have become central actors within their respective national political systems. Many of these parties have also gained influence at the European level, joining or forming groups such as *Patriots for Europe (Patriots)*, the *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR), or the *Europe of Sovereign Nations* (ESN). However, internal disagreements and divergent national agendas have hindered the formation of a cohesive and unified radical right bloc in the European Parliament.

With the arrival of the new decade, the PRR has entered a phase of consolidation across Europe. Today, nearly all European political systems include at least one PRR party, with the notable exceptions of Ireland, Luxembourg, and Malta. In numerous countries, these parties have surpassed the 20–25% electoral threshold, achieving historically unprecedented levels of support. Moreover, they currently participate in government in seven EU member states: Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Sweden.

Table 1. Electoral performance and expansion of PRR parties in Europe (1980-2024)

Years	Average Vote Share (%)	Number of Countries	Number of Parties	Main Developments
1980–89	1.1	17	8	Marginal presence, initial breakthroughs in Belgium and France, beginnings of institutionalisation in Austria and Switzerland
1990–99	4.4	28	24	Expansion and consolidation in Austria, France, Italy; radical right becomes a fixture in most national elections
2000–09	4.7	28	24	Period of relative stability and entry into government coalitions; emergence of PRR parties in post-communist countries
2010–19	7.5	28	34	Significant surge across Western and Eastern Europe; increasing mainstream adoption of radical right rhetoric; weakening of cordon sanitaire, new political parties in Iberian Peninsula.
2020–24	17.5	27–28	40+	Historical peak in vote share and parliamentary representation; record national results in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal, consolidation of PRR as major European political force.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Note: The average vote share represents the mean electoral support for PRR parties across participating European countries in national and European elections during each period.

Table 2.Key distinctions between the Extreme right and PRR

Issue	Extreme Right	PRR
Vision of the Nation	Advocates racial theories of nationhood; seeks to (re)construct a racially defined state.	Promotes an ethnic conception of the nation based on shared language, religion, history, and cultural traditions; aims to establish a culturally homogeneous state.
Position on Immigration	Categorically rejects all forms of immigration, whether legal or irregular, in order to preserve the native community.	Accepts legal immigration only when it conforms to the ethnic and cultural norms of the native population.
Authoritarianism	Supports a strictly hierarchical and authoritarian order, with strong state control and coercion.	Endorses a firmly ordered society in which authority is strongly enforced, and violations are harshly sanctioned.
Relationship with Democracy	Rejects the core tenets of democracy, including political equality and pluralistic majority rule; poses a fundamental threat to democratic governance.	Formally adheres to democratic procedures, but challenges liberal democratic principles such as minority rights, judicial independence, and checks and balances.
Relationship with Fascism	Maintains ideological, symbolic, and historical affinities with interwar fascism.	Explicitly distances itself from classical fascism, denying any direct ideological or historical affiliation.
Contemporary Relevance	Politically marginal and largely irrelevant within the current European political landscape.	Represents a prominent and influential actor in contemporary European politics, with growing electoral and institutional strength.

Source: Author´s own elaboration.

2.2 Towards a minimal definition of the PRR

In order to establish a coherent analytical framework for the comparative analysis of PRR formations, this section proposes a minimal operational definition. The categorisation of the PRR remains a subject of considerable scholarly debate within political science—further complicated by the challenges involved in classifying specific parties within this ideological family. For the purposes of this study, the concept and categorisation of the PRR will be employed to identify, analyse, and refer to the political formations associated with this party family, particularly those constituting the empirical focus of this research: Vox in Spain and PiS in Poland. This conceptual choice is grounded in a robust body of theoretical and methodological literature and draws primarily upon the influential framework developed by Cas Mudde (2007).

This analytical approach corresponds closely with the historical evolution of PRR parties, which—over recent decades—have transitioned from marginal actors to central players within national political systems. This process is often described as the normalisation of the radical right. By adopting the PRR category, this study avoids reductionist interpretations that portray such parties as mere continuations of fascist traditions or indiscriminately label them as neo-fascist. Instead, it employs a transversal analytical framework that can be applied meaningfully across diverse national contexts in Europe, thereby enhancing conceptual clarity and mitigating the ambiguities that may otherwise compromise analytical rigour.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the PRR does not constitute a homogeneous political movement. Each party exhibits distinct features shaped by its respective national and historical context. Nonetheless, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, all PRR parties share three core ideological components that justify their classification within a common party family: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007).

Nativism constitutes the dominant ideological feature of the PRR. It is best understood as the convergence of nationalism and xenophobia, entailing the belief that states should be exclusively inhabited by members of the native group—conceived as the nation. From this perspective, non-native elements—whether individuals, ideas, or cultural influences—are portrayed as inherently threatening to the homogeneity and integrity of the nation-state.

Discursively, PRR parties express their nativism primarily through anti-immigration rhetoric, framing immigrants as a danger to the country's cultural cohesion, economic stability, and public security. This approach can manifest in various ways, ranging from the advocacy of restrictive immigration laws to the promotion of xenophobic attitudes and the social exclusion of immigrant populations (Mudde, 2010).

Beyond overt anti-immigrant discourse, PRR actors frequently demonstrate a broader ideological commitment to national identity. This is often articulated through the defence of a particular way of life and the elevation of national belonging as a central political value. In this sense, nativism functions not only as a policy orientation but as a foundational narrative underpinning the PRR's vision of a culturally homogeneous and politically sovereign community.

Authoritarianism, the second ideological pillar, does not necessarily imply support for a specific authoritarian regime. Rather, it reflects a broader belief in a strictly ordered society, in which violations of authority should be met with severe punishment (Mudde, 2019). This orientation materialises in policy proposals calling for more robust "law and order" measures, such as the expansion of police powers and the limitation of judicial oversight. These proposals are typically embedded within a wider security discourse, in which immigration—particularly irregular immigration—is blamed for rising criminality and social disorder.

Importantly, the authoritarianism of PRR parties also extends into the cultural sphere. This is evident in their defence of traditional values, including the promotion of heteronormative family models and the privileged role of religious institutions—especially those aligned with national identity—in shaping moral and social order. In this context, authoritarianism serves to reinforce a broader ideological vision rooted in cultural conservatism and moral traditionalism.

Populism, the third core element, refers to an ideological logic that remains the subject of ongoing academic debate (Aslanidis, 2016; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Panizza, 2005; Weyland, 2001). Despite conceptual divergences, there has been increasing convergence around the so-called ideational approach, which conceptualises populism as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Within this framework, populism constructs a Manichaean opposition between a pure, virtuous people and a corrupt, self-serving elite

(Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). It presents itself primarily as a moral worldview, through which the establishment is delegitimised, and the people are idealised and romanticised (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014).

Although populism does not occupy the central position within the PRR's ideological constellation, that role is more accurately attributed to nativism, it remains a deeply embedded element of its political discourse. In particular, the populist notion of the people reinforces the nativist dichotomy between us and them (Caiani & della Porta, 2011), thereby contributing to the construction of exclusionary nationalism and intensifying anti-elite sentiment. This ideological confluence is what Taguieff (2007) terms national populism: a formation characterised by intensely anti-political rhetoric that manifests in sustained attacks on political elites, the ruling class, and liberal democratic institutions. As Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) observe, national populism seeks to prioritise the interests of the nation while claiming to give voice to those who feel neglected—or even despised—by distant and often corrupt elites.

2.3 The economy does (not) matter: in search of the winning formula

The socioeconomic positioning of PRR parties is not a defining feature of their ideological identity. As Cas Mudde argues—particularly in the chapter It's Not the Economy, Stupid from his seminal work PRR in Europe (2007)—economic issues are of secondary importance to this party family. Rather than shaping the ideological core, economic preferences derive from the cultural axis, composed of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. As such, economic positions are often instrumentalised to weaken mainstream competitors, attack political elites, and broaden electoral appeal.

This strategic flexibility has enabled the coexistence—and, at times, alternation—of two distinct and occasionally antagonistic economic paradigms within the PRR family. In their influential study The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis (1997), Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony J. McGann examined how the third wave of radical right-wing parties broke into stable party systems that had traditionally been dominated by forms of bipartisanism. According to their analysis, PRR parties succeeded by offering a novel political proposal, characterised by a selective issue agenda and an innovative combination of topics.

They argued that the electoral strength of these formations lay in their emergence as niche parties that strategically fused strongly authoritarian proposals—such as the reintroduction of the death penalty, tougher sentencing for street crime, the immediate expulsion of undocumented migrants, or the banning of extremist organisations—with an economically liberal programme inspired by Reaganite and Thatcherite models. According to their typology, the PRR of the late twentieth century represented "a combination of extreme and economically rightist, free-marketeering as well as politically and culturally authoritarian positions" (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995).

This configuration was not only unprecedented within the context of European party competition but also particularly attractive to segments of the conservative electorate. For this reason, Kitschelt coined the term "winning formula" to describe this strategic synthesis.

This initial wave of parties—including Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National, which secured 14.9% of the vote in the 1988 French presidential election and triggered a major loss of support for the centre-right, and Austria's FPÖ under Jörg Haider,

which struggled to reconcile its liberal and nativist wings—constructed their programmes around a limited number of issues, most notably the triad of security, identity, and immigration. At the same time, they clearly identified their political enemies: high taxation, immigration, the traditional left, and the mainstream political class.

However, subsequent developments have led scholars to question whether this economic model remains central to the PRR's appeal. In 2007, political scientist Sarah L. de Lange published the article A New Winning Formula? The Programmatic Appeal of the Radical Right, in which she re-examined Kitschelt and McGann's thesis to determine whether PRR parties had developed a new economic orientation. In recent decades, scholars have increasingly observed a shift away from the original "winning formula", particularly its radical neoliberal core.

Major PRR formations in Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, and Italy have largely abandoned the neoliberalism of the 1980s—which had previously placed them at the forefront of the fight against the post-WWII "cultural dominance of the left"—in favour of a social agenda often described as that of "working-class parties without socialism" (Casals, 2015). This strategic reorientation has given rise to what the academic literature has termed welfare chauvinism.

The defining feature of welfare chauvinism is its defence of a selective and exclusionary welfare state, in which access to social protection is made contingent upon nativist criteria. As Ennser-Jedenastik (2018) notes, welfare chauvinism cuts across the traditional left–right divide by combining support for elements of the welfare state (in opposition to neoliberal retrenchment) with restrictive positions on who is deemed worthy of receiving such benefits. In other words, it advocates for the protection of the welfare state while justifying opposition to immigration on the grounds that it threatens the sustainability of the national social model.

Welfare chauvinists thus frame immigrants and globalist elites as joint agents in the dismantling of national identity, public services, and institutional structures. This configuration marks a significant departure from the original *winning formula* and opens the door to what Kitschelt and McGann (2005) later termed the *second winning formula*. This newer model "does not require a consistent neoliberalism, but rather a compromise that is sufficiently free market to appeal to petty bourgeois

voters but does not alienate working-class support by attacking the welfare state too vigorously, while at the same time promising protectionism favourable to both".

The second winning formula derives its strength, first, from its capacity to respond to changes in the programmatic supply of competing parties, and second, from its ability to carve out a distinct ideological niche. It also reflects an adaptation to the economic liberalisation of mainstream left-wing parties, incorporating elements of the traditional left's economic agenda, but reframed through a culturally right-wing lens.

Like its predecessor, the welfare chauvinist strategy offers a coherent and electorally attractive political space—one that is well suited to the ideological evolution of both centre-left and centre-right parties. Crucially, it also represents a deliberate attempt to reposition the PRR as a viable alternative for working-class voters, a defining trait of several contemporary PRR formations in Europe.

Nevertheless, as emphasised throughout this chapter, the PRR remains a heterogeneous party family. Not all its members have embraced this economic reorientation: some continue to adhere to traditional free-market orthodoxy, while others have moved in the opposite direction, further radicalising their economic platforms.

The theoretical framework developed in this chapter provides the foundation for the empirical analysis of *Vox* and *PiS*, examined as representative cases of the PRR in Spain and Poland, respectively. Particular attention will be given to how each party articulates the core ideological dimensions—*nativism*, *authoritarianism*, and *populism*—as well as their approach to economic policy. This analysis will illuminate the extent to which differing national contexts shape programmatic adaptation within this heterogeneous political tradition.

Chapter 3. Comparative party-system dynamics and political opportunity structures: the rise and consolidation of PRR in Spain and Poland

The rise and consolidation of PRR parties across Europe has generated a wide-ranging academic debate on the conditions that explain their emergence, ideological trajectories, and impact on liberal democracy. While these parties share core ideological features—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—their political and institutional development varies substantially across national contexts.

This chapter contributes to that debate by examining, from a comparative perspective, the evolution of party systems in Spain and Poland, with particular attention to how institutional configurations and political opportunity structures have shaped the emergence and consolidation of Vox and PiS. Drawing on a supply-side approach and grounded in the literature on PRR parties, the analysis explores how these actors capitalised on systemic crises, electoral realignments, and broader socio-political dislocations to establish themselves as influential players in their respective national arenas. By situating their trajectories within distinct historical and institutional frameworks, the chapter seeks to identify the mechanisms that account for their divergent processes of radicalisation and institutionalisation.

The chapter is organised into four sections: two devoted to Spanish case and two to Polish case. The first traces the historical evolution of the Spanish party system from the democratic transition of 1977 to the present. The second examines the rise of Vox within this shifting landscape, highlighting the political, social, and cultural dynamics that facilitated its emergence and consolidation as Spain's third-largest party. The third provides a parallel analysis of Poland's party system since the democratic transition of 1989. The final section turns to the trajectory of PiS, exploring its origins, ideological radicalisation, transformation into a PRR formation, experience in government, and subsequent return to opposition following the 2023 electoral defeat.

3.1 Spain´s party-system evolution since democratic restoration (1977-2024)

3.1.1 Democratic transition and consolidation of bipartisanship (1977-2015)

Since the restoration of democracy in 1977, Spanish politics have enjoyed a significant degree of continuity. The transition from Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975) to a liberal democracy was underpinned by a broad political consensus aimed at ensuring institutional stability and political (and social) peace, with particular emphasis on the 1978 Constitution. This foundational text has contributed to what some scholars describe as a 'cult of consensus', fostering a discourse of political harmony that continues to shape Spain's political culture (Rueda, 2024). A cautious approach to governance—especially concerning political and territorial unity—has become a defining feature of the Spanish democratic system.

The Spanish political landscape was broadly characterised by stability and bipartisanship, with relatively low levels of fragmentation, despite the enduring presence of regionalist and nationalist parties. Over time, Spanish politics evolved through distinct electoral cycles, each defined by shifting patterns of electoral support, structural features of the party system, and variations in political competition, including levels of fragmentation, volatility, and ideological polarisation (Montero, 1988; Linz & Montero, 2001). Table 3 summarises the electoral cycles.

Table 3. Government formation in Spain (1977-2023)

Legislature and years			Government type	Governing parties					
Period	Legislature	Years	Government type	Party	Prime Minister	Seats	% Seats	External support	Months
I	0	1977–1979	SPMG	UCD	Suárez	166	47.4	No	25
I	I	1979–1981	SPMG	UCD	Suárez	168	48.0	No	22
I	I (cont.)	1981–1982	SPMG	UCD	Calvo-Sotelo	—	—	—	21
II	II	1982–1986	SPMG	PSOE	González	202	57.7	No	44
II	III	1986–1989	SPMG	PSOE	González	184	52.6	No	40
II	IV	1989–1993	SPMG	PSOE	González	175	50.0	No	44
II	V	1993–1996	SPMG	PSOE	González	159	45.4	Yes	33
III	VI	1996–2000	SPMG	PP	Aznar	156	45.6	Yes	48
III	VII	2000–2004	SPMG	PP	Aznar	183	52.3	No	48
III	VIII	2004–2008	SPMG	PSOE	Zapatero	164	46.9	Yes	48
III	IX	2008–2011	SPMG	PSOE	Zapatero	169	48.3	No	44
III	X	2011–2015	SPMG	PP	Rajoy	186	53.1	No	48
IV	XI	2015–2016	NGF	—	—	—	—	—	7
IV	XII	2016–2018	SPMG	PP	Rajoy	137	39.1	Yes	19
IV	XIII	2018–2019	SPMG	PSOE	Sánchez	85	24.3	Yes	11
IV	XIII	2019–	MCG	— (caretaker)	—	—	—	—	6
IV	XIV	2019–2023	MCG	PSOE + UP	Sánchez	120 + 35	34.3 + 10.0	No	40
IV	XIV	2023–	MCG	PSOE + Sumar	Sánchez	121 + 31	31.7 + 12.3	No	—

Source: Author's elaboration based on Ministerio del Interior (1977–2023).

Note: SPMG = Single-party majority government; MCG = multi-party coalition government; NGF = No government formed.

The first electoral cycle encompassed the initial two democratic elections, held in 1977 and 1979. These contests laid the foundation for a moderate and pluralist party system, facilitating the institutionalisation of democracy following four decades of authoritarian rule. Adolfo Suárez's centre-right party, the Union of the Democratic Centre (Unión de Centro Democrático, UCD), won a decisive victory in 1977, forming a minority single-party government tasked with drafting a new democratic constitution. This objective was achieved with the approval of nearly 90% of the electorate in the December 1978 referendum, marking the conclusion of the so-called Constituent Legislature.

The UCD maintained its leadership in the 1979 elections, again forming a minority government and initiating the process of territorial decentralisation. However, internal party divisions, economic difficulties, and mounting political tensions ultimately led to Suárez's resignation. He was succeeded by Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo, who governed until the end of the legislative term (Rama et al., 2021).

The second cycle was defined by the political dominance of the PSOE ("*Partido Socialista Obrero Español")* under Felipe González. Positioned on the centre-left and aligned with the broader European social-democratic tradition, the PSOE secured four consecutive electoral victories in 1982, 1986, 1989, and 1993. This era witnessed Spain's integration into key supranational institutions, notably the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), alongside significant processes of economic modernisation and internationalisation.

The 1982 general election marked a turning point in Spanish politics. The PSOE experienced an unprecedented increase in parliamentary representation—from 121 to 202 seats, the highest number ever secured by a single party in democratic Spain—while the UCD collapsed, dropping from 168 to just 11 seats. Simultaneously, the conservative Popular Alliance (Alianza Popular, AP)—the precursor to the PP, which rebranded in 1989—emerged as the main opposition force, rising from 9 to 107 seats. This electoral realignment inaugurated a predominant party system in which the PSOE held a hegemonic position over a fragmented opposition (Linz & Montero, 2001).

PSOE governed with three successive absolute majorities (1982, 1986, 1989) and a relative majority in 1993. In the absence of an outright majority, his government relied on parliamentary support from minority and regionalist parties, particularly

the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco, PNV) and Convergència i Unió (CiU). These parties frequently supported both PSOE and PP-led governments in exchange for concessions on regional autonomy and economic policy.

The third cycle was characterised by increasing competition between the PSOE and PP, with the two parties alternately holding power and becoming the twin pillars of a relatively stable system. This phase was underpinned by a tacit consensus on the centrality of the left–right divide and a shared respect for the institutions established during the democratic transition.

Five general elections defined this period: 1996 (minority government under José María Aznar's PP), 2000 (PP majority under Aznar), 2004 and 2008 (minority governments under José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's PSOE), and 2011 (majority government under Mariano Rajoy's PP). In 1996, Aznar secured parliamentary support from CiU, PNV, and the Canarian Coalition (Coalición Canaria, CC). In 2004, Zapatero formed a government with backing from the United Left (Izquierda Unida, IU) and the Catalan nationalist Republican Left of Catalonia (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, ERC). By 2008, his investiture was facilitated by the abstention of IU, CiU, PNV, and three smaller regionalist parties, including CC and Nafarroa Bai.

The 2011 general election marked a significant turning point. The PSOE experienced a dramatic electoral collapse, reflecting a broader crisis affecting centre-left parties across Europe in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Meanwhile, emerging parties such as Union, Progress and Democracy (Unión, Progreso y Democracia, UPyD) and the radical left IU achieved notable gains (Rama et al., 2021). These results foreshadowed the disruption of the traditional two-party system in the subsequent electoral cycle.

3.1.2 Breakdown of bipartisanship and the party-system reconfiguration (2015-2024)

Before analysing the next political cycle—arguably one of the most significant in recent Spanish history—it is necessary to examine several key developments in the preceding years, which witnessed the breakdown of the political stability that had long characterised the Spanish party system. This rupture is largely attributable to the 2008 financial crisis, which had particularly severe consequences in Spain, especially in terms of unemployment.

A central pillar of Spain's democratic narrative was the "social pact" concerning how the country would modernise and ensure collective well-being. One of the key vulnerabilities of the Spanish economy was its heavy reliance on the construction sector, which fostered an economic model centred on real estate while sidelining more productive sectors. The bursting of the property bubble in the late 2000s triggered massive job losses linked to construction—both directly and indirectly. This not only fuelled a dramatic surge in unemployment but also intensified the financial crisis, as banks had extended extensive credit for home purchase.

The global financial crisis of 2008 brought an end to the so-called "Spanish miracle" of the early twenty-first century. The political consequences were profound. The 2010s were marked by growing discontent among Spain's working classes. The general strike of 2010 against the Socialist government—in which the General Union of Workers (UGT), historically aligned with the PSOE, participated—was arguably the first organised expression of this wave of social unrest. The inability of either the governing party or the conservative opposition to credibly incorporate popular demands into their discourses meant that this discontent remained unaddressed.

Public sector employees were also severely affected, as the government introduced austerity measures to reduce the national deficit, including wage cuts, salary freezes, and the elimination of additional payments such as the Christmas bonus. Evictions became one of the most visible and traumatic consequences of the crisis. At the same time, corruption emerged as a major public concern. A series of scandals involving the PP—which governed between 2011 and 2018—led to public concern over corruption more than doubling, peaking in November 2014 when 64% of respondents in CIS surveys identified "corruption and fraud" as one of the

country's main problems (Orriols & Cordero, 2016). Since the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) was also implicated in several corruption cases, the demand for anti-corruption reform became an additional form of social pressure that the political system proved unable to absorb.

This context inevitably reshaped the political landscape, as the traditional parties came to be perceived as incapable of addressing popular grievances. The crisis generated not only short-term political consequences but also longer-term structural effects, producing a rupture between a significant segment of the citizenry and political institutions—including the discursive foundations of the democratic system—and thereby shaking the pillars of bipartisanship. Although the economic crisis began in the late 2000s, it was not until the mid-2010s that discursive shifts began to significantly disrupt the party system. Despite the severity of the crisis and mounting public discontent, the system initially displayed resilience, as evidenced in the outcome of the 2011 general election.

The 15-M movement, which emerged in 2011 and drew inspiration from civic mobilisations in Iceland, Greece, and the Arab Spring, represented the most prominent expression of this discontent—and arguably the most significant social movement in Spain in recent decades, comparable only to those that accompanied the country's democratic transition. Its participants—predominantly young, educated, and sympathetic to left-wing ideas—demanded transparency, anti-corruption reforms, democratic regeneration, and closer connections between citizens and their representatives. They also advocated for financial regulation, access to housing, and measures to address economic insecurity. Many of these demands were subsequently channelled into the political arena, most notably by Podemos in the mid-2010s.

Although the movement declined in visibility in the latter half of the decade, its effects remain discernible in contemporary Spanish politics. Its institutional and discursive legacies have become embedded within the political system, generating enduring political inheritances that continue to shape dynamics today.

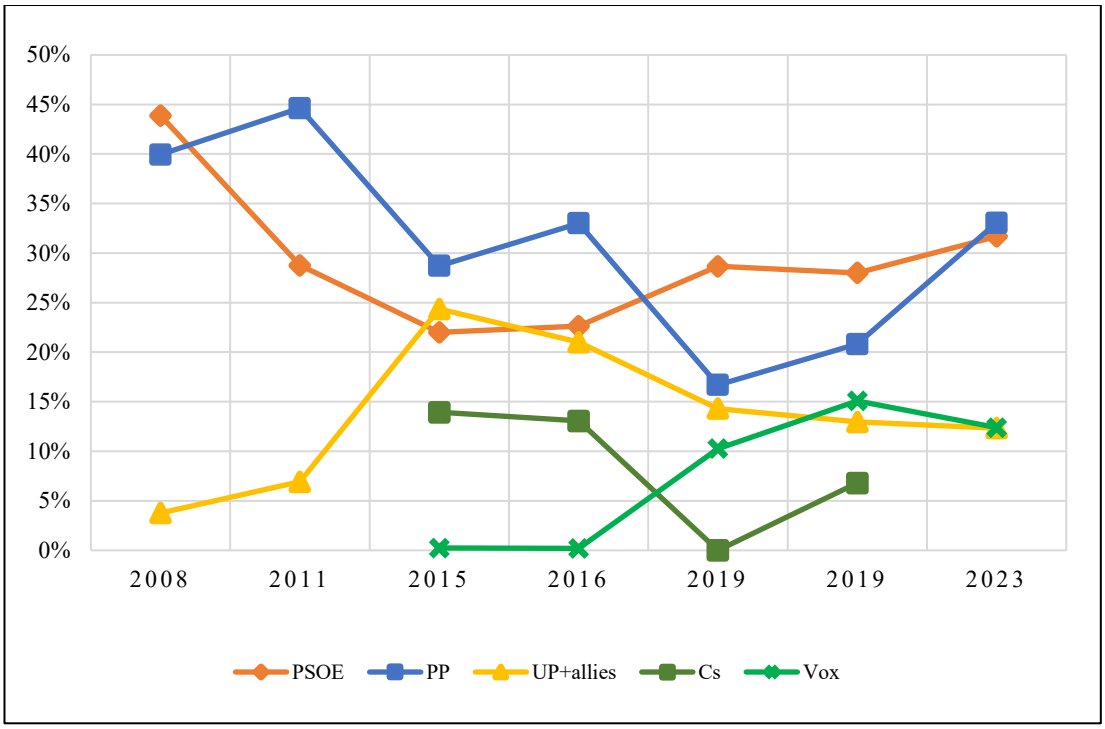
Feminism also emerged as a disruptive force, albeit in a more incremental fashion. It gained salience as a constellation of social, legal, economic, and cultural demands that compelled all political actors to adopt explicit positions either in support of or in opposition to it. Feminist mobilisations intensified during the second half of the

decade, with millions of women demonstrating across the country. While left-wing parties largely embraced the movement's demands, conservative parties responded with ambiguity, and in some cases direct opposition (Rueda, 2024).

The other major disruptive development was the 2017–2018 constitutional crisis, triggered by the confrontation between the Catalan independence movement and the Spanish state—a conflict that, as will be discussed later, played a pivotal role in the rise of Vox.

Building on the structural transformations outlined above, the fourth and most recent electoral cycle marks the decline of bipartisanship and the onset of an era characterised by fragmentation and precarious governance. The general election of 2015 inaugurated a new political order defined by heightened polarisation and increasing party system fragmentation. This structural transformation posed significant challenges to political stability and effective governance. The combined vote share of the two traditional parties—the PP and the PSOE—fell dramatically from 74.4% in 2011 to 51.1% in 2015, while their combined share of parliamentary seats dropped from 84.6% to 60.9% (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentaje of votes in Spanish general elections (2008-2023)



Source: Author´s own bases on data from Ministerio del Interior (2008, 2011, 2015, 2016, 2019a, 2019b,2023).

Note: Results refer to national vote shares in general elections. UP = Unidas Podemos and allied lists (from 2015 onwards). In 2015, Podemos and Izquierda Unida (IU) contested the elections separately but subsequently formed a joint list. In 2019, two general elections were held (April and November). In 2023, the main left-wing candidacy was Sumar, which replaced Unidas Podemos.

This realignment coincided with the emergence of two new national-level actors: *Podemos* on the left and *Ciudadanos* (Cs) on the centre-right. *Podemos* was founded in January 2014 by a group of university professors and intellectuals seeking to channel the political energy ignited by the 15-M movement, against the backdrop of the broader failure of the traditional left to capitalise on its momentum. Initially inspired by Ernesto Laclau's populist theory, the party gradually shifted towards more conventional left-wing positions from 2016 onwards. Its core agenda centres on anti-austerity measures, the defence of the welfare state, feminism, and the green transition.

Ciudadanos, by contrast, was founded in 2006 as a reaction to Catalan nationalism but only rose to national prominence in 2015. Originally espousing liberal progressivism and presenting itself as a centrist alternative to both the PSOE and the PP, the party rejected the traditional left–right dichotomy. Instead, it positioned

itself as a "third way" force and adopted the label of "radical centre," emphasising moderation and pragmatism (Rueda, 2024).

Both *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos* had already demonstrated their electoral potential in the 2014 European Parliament elections. *Podemos* secured 7.98% of the vote and five seats, while *Ciudadanos* obtained 497,146 votes (3.16%) and two seats. Together, they captured around 11% of the national vote and seven MEPs. In the 2015 general election, both parties significantly expanded their influence, jointly winning over one-third of the national vote and 109 out of 350 seats in the Congress of Deputies. *Podemos* alone garnered five million votes and 69 seats, while *Ciudadanos* achieved three and a half million votes and 40 seats (Rama, Cordero & Zagórski, 2021). As Lluis Orriols and Guillermo Cordero note, "the beneficiaries of the collapse of the two-party system [were] Podemos and Ciudadanos [whose emergence] radically changed the Spanish party system, which moved from a two-party system to a multi-party system" (Orriols & Cordero, 2016).

The near-equal distribution of seats between the ideological blocs—PP and *Ciudadanos* (163 seats) versus PSOE and *Podemos* (159 seats)—combined with the difficulty of attracting additional support from regional parties, particularly amid escalating tensions in Catalonia, produced a parliamentary deadlock. For the first time since the democratic transition, no government could be formed.

New elections were held in June 2016, yielding a similarly fragmented outcome. Under growing public pressure, a minority government led by Mariano Rajoy was eventually constituted, marking the weakest parliamentary support (39.1% of seats) for any executive since 1977

Less than two years later, in June 2018, a corruption scandal engulfing the PP triggered a motion of no confidence spearheaded by Pedro Sánchez and supported by *Unidas Podemos* and several regionalist parties. The motion succeeded, and Sánchez formed a minority government. However, when Catalan nationalist parties withdrew their backing following the failure of a budget vote in February 2019, Sánchez was compelled to call a snap general election—the shortest government tenure since the democratic transition.

In 2019, the Spanish political landscape became less volatile but increasingly polarised. In the April election, the PSOE emerged as the largest force, securing 28.7% of the vote and 120 seats. The principal loser was the PP, whose support

collapsed to 16.7%, a loss of 71 seats that reduced its total to 66. This dramatic decline was largely attributable to the rise of *Ciudadanos* and the breakthrough of *Vox*, a far-right nationalist party with a distinctly nativist and anti-immigration platform.

The failure of the PSOE and *Unidas Podemos* to reach a coalition agreement prompted fresh elections in November 2019, which yielded an even more fragmented parliament. Although the PSOE again won the most seats, it lost three compared with April. The PP improved its performance, rising to 20.8% of the vote and 83 seats. *Vox* emerged as the main beneficiary, capturing 15% of the vote and 52 seats, thereby becoming the third-largest party in Congress (Rama, Cordero & Zagórski, 2021).

After ten months of caretaker government, Sánchez was narrowly elected Prime Minister in January 2020, with 167 votes in favour, 165 against, and 18 abstentions. This resulted in Spain's first coalition government since 1939, formed by the PSOE and *Unidas Podemos* with the external support of regionalist parties such as the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and Catalan nationalists. These actors were generally more inclined to align with the left, given the overlap between territorial and left–right cleavages in the Spanish context. Nonetheless, internal frictions within the coalition frequently complicated the legislative process and constrained governmental effectiveness.

In response to the PSOE's poor performance in the local and regional elections of 28 May 2023, Sánchez advanced the general election, originally scheduled for December. Despite expectations of a decisive PP victory—fuelled by favourable polling and regional momentum—its leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, failed to secure a governing majority. Although the PP became the largest party, winning 33% of the vote and 136 seats (a gain of 47), it fell short of an absolute majority. *Vox* underperformed, securing 12% of the vote and 33 seats. The combined PP–Vox bloc thus lacked the numbers to form a government, particularly given the refusal of other parties to support or even abstain in a vote that would involve *Vox* in government.

In contrast, the PSOE exceeded expectations, winning 31% of the vote and 121 seats—an improvement on its 2019 result. The left successfully mobilised its electorate in a closely contested campaign, aided by *Sumar*, a newly formed

coalition of far-left parties that absorbed *Unidas Podemos*. This outcome enabled Sánchez to negotiate a renewed progressive coalition government, once again supported by smaller regionalist forces (CSIC, 2023).

To remain in office, Sánchez secured the crucial backing of *Junts per Catalunya*, a right-wing Catalan separatist party, by offering significant concessions—notably an amnesty for political leaders involved in the 2017 unilateral declaration of independence. Yet the heterogeneity of the parties underpinning the PSOE–*Sumar* government constitutes its greatest vulnerability. Since the beginning of the current legislature, the government has faced substantial difficulties in advancing its legislative agenda and has already lost 35 parliamentary votes—underscoring the fragility and instability of Spain's contemporary political system.

3.2 The rise of Vox: from conservative dissent to PRR

3.2.1 Origins and early years (2013-2016): from conservative dissent to party formation

The origins of Vox lie in the growing disillusionment among segments of the Spanish right with the trajectory of the PP. In December 2013, a group of former PP members—Santiago Abascal, José Antonio Ortega Lara, and Alejo Vidal-Quadras—founded Vox (Latin for "voice"). Aligned with former Prime Minister José María Aznar, these figures criticised Mariano Rajoy's leadership, accusing him of abandoning the PP's core ideological principles. Their grievances centred on what they perceived as excessive moderation in key areas, including the defence of traditional values, economic liberalism (Ferreira, 2019), and, most notably, Rajoy's passivity in addressing the Catalan independence challenge (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019). Vox repeatedly denounced the PP as *la derecha cobarde* ("the cowardly right"), framing it as either unwilling or incapable of confronting separatism and so-called political correctness with sufficient determination.

As Santiago Abascal argued in 2015:

"The People's Party has adopted the fiscal policies of the left, the moral relativism of the left, Zapatero's ideological legislation, the totalitarian gender ideology, equality policies and positive discrimination. [...] Rajoy is a traitor. [...] He is Zapatero's executor" (Abascal, 2015).

From its inception, Vox positioned itself to the right of the PP while rejecting the "far-right" label (Ferreira, 2019). Initially centred around Alejo Vidal-Quadras—former leader of the PP in Catalonia and a prominent figure within its most conservative faction—the party sought to present itself as the liberal-conservative alternative that the PP had ostensibly abandoned (Altozano, 2018). The 2014 European Parliament elections constituted Vox's first electoral test, as it attempted to channel the discontent of conservative voters alienated from the PP and establish itself as a viable institutional actor.

Electoral results, however, fell short of expectations. Vox secured 246,833 votes (1.57%), narrowly missing a seat by just 1,740 votes. This outcome highlighted the structural difficulties faced by new entrants on the Spanish right, particularly in a political arena still dominated by the PP.

3.2.2 Strategic struggles and marginalisation (2014-2016): internal challenges and the search for legitimacy

A few months after its foundation, Alejo Vidal-Quadras resigned from Vox in an attempt to prevent further fragmentation of the right-wing vote, particularly in light of the growing prominence of Podemos. In September 2014, Santiago Abascal—a former member of the Basque Parliament who would go on to become Vox's long-standing leader—was elected party president.

The party's electoral performance during this early period was notably poor. Its vote share fell from 1.57 per cent in the 2014 European Parliament elections to just 0.23 per cent and 0.20 per cent in the Spanish general elections of December 2015 and June 2016, respectively. Beyond this weak electoral record, Vox also endured what has been described as a period of *media invisibility* (Franzé & Fernández-Vázquez, 2022). In response, it adopted attention-seeking strategies, most notably a symbolic protest in June 2016, when party members hoisted a large Spanish flag on the Rock of Gibraltar (El Confidencial, 2016).

A pivotal moment came in January 2017, when Vox was invited to participate in the "Freedom for Europe" summit held in Koblenz, Germany. This gathering brought together leading parties of the European PRR and marked an important milestone in Vox's trajectory. The event sought to consolidate transnational networks within the European PRR and confirmed Vox's emerging role as Spain's

representative within this ideological family. It also enabled the party to establish links with figures such as Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, and Matteo Salvini.

As Abascal declared:

"Vox is at the epicentre of the great backlash that is emerging across the world, and which will represent a turning point for the victory of our ideas and the salvation of the West, its freedom, and its identity" (Abascal, 2017).

Following this event, Vox intensified its efforts to cultivate alliances with ideologically aligned parties across Europe while also enhancing its visibility in both national and international media. Drawing on the strategies of its European counterparts, the party gradually refined its discourse and developed a more coherent political strategy.

3.2.3 The Catalan crisis as a political opportunity (2017-2018): Vox´s emergence as a defender of national unity

As previously noted, one of the most disruptive events in the second half of the 2010s was the Spanish constitutional crisis of 2017–2018, triggered by the confrontation between the Catalan independence movement and the central government. Catalan nationalism has long been a central force in Spanish politics and, as McRoberts (2022) observes, is "especially notable for its tenacity, having resisted even the most determined efforts of the Franco regime to stamp it out." Since the restoration of democracy, Catalan nationalism has often been articulated through projects of stateless nation-building.

Tensions surrounding territorial politics have never been absent. Significant crises emerged in 2006 with the contested reform of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy—later revised by the Spanish Parliament—and again in 2014 with the organisation of an unofficial referendum (Serra et al., 2018). These developments redirected national attention towards competing conceptions of nationalism—centripetal and centrifugal—and forced political actors to engage more directly with the territorial cleavage. However, the mobilisation of 2017 represented a qualitative leap, profoundly disrupting the Spanish party system (Rueda, 2024).

On 1 October 2017, the Catalan government held a referendum on independence, declared illegal by both the Spanish government and the Constitutional Court. Despite this, more than two million Catalans—around 43 per cent of the

electorate—participated, with over 90 per cent voting in favour of independence. On 27 October, the Catalan Parliament unilaterally declared independence. In response, the Spanish government, led by the PP, invoked Article 155 of the Constitution, suspending Catalan autonomy. The Catalan President, Carles Puigdemont, and several members of his cabinet fled abroad, while others, including Vice-President Oriol Junqueras, were arrested. The Spanish government subsequently called new elections to the Catalan Parliament, in which Ciudadanos achieved a historic victory by winning one in four votes. Nevertheless, pro-independence parties retained a parliamentary majority, enabling the appointment of a new pro-independence regional president (Martí & Cetrà, 2016; Orriols & Rodon, 2016; Guntermann et al., 2018).

On the same day, the Senate formally approved the activation of Article 155, thereby endorsing both the suspension of Catalonia's autonomy and the call for fresh elections on 21 December 2017. Despite the electoral success of Ciudadanos, pro-independence parties once again secured sufficient seats to form a government, appointing Quim Torra as President of the Generalitat of Catalunya. Vox declined to participate in this election, dismissing it as a "concealed referendum" (Rueda, 2024).

Nonetheless, Vox assumed a prominent role in the legal proceedings against pro-independence leaders by initiating multiple lawsuits. In its complaint to the Catalan High Court, the party accused separatist leaders of offences including the passage of laws suspended by the Constitutional Court and the misuse of public funds to organise the referendum. In its filing with the Supreme Court, Vox demanded severe penalties for rebellion, sedition, and embezzlement of public funds.

The unilateral declaration of independence and the Spanish government's response created a political opportunity for Vox, which until then had remained largely marginal in Spanish politics. By acting as a popular prosecutor—a legal provision in Spanish law that allows citizens or organisations to participate in criminal proceedings alongside the public prosecutor—in the trial against the leaders of the procés, Vox gained significant visibility and positioned itself as the only party unequivocally defending the unity of Spain in the face of the Catalan independence challenge (Rama, Cordero et al., 2021).

From October 2018 onwards, Vox benefitted from growing media exposure, which translated into rising popular support. The party successfully positioned itself as a hardline anti-separatist alternative, while attracting disaffected figures from the PP and consolidating steady organisational growth. According to pre-electoral surveys, Vox was projected to secure 1.4 per cent of the vote, approaching the threshold for representation in Madrid and other key constituencies (CIS, 2018).

The October 2018 Vistalegre rally, held under the slogan *España Viva* ("Living Spain"), constituted a watershed in Vox's trajectory, signalling its capacity for mass mobilisation. Drawing more than 9,000 participants, the event marked the entry of a party to the right of the mainstream conservative bloc into the national political arena with unprecedented strength. As Casals (2018) observes, one of Vox's principal achievements during this period was its ability to distance itself from explicit neo-Francoist associations while simultaneously incorporating traditional far-right themes—such as opposition to the Law of Historical Memory and Catalan separatism—alongside newer issues including hostility to Islam, rejection of irregular immigration, and the defence of the family.

3.2.4 From marginality to mainstream: electoral breakthrough and institutional consolidation (2018-2023)

Until late 2018, Vox had contested every election with negligible support (Table 4 and Figure 2). This dynamic shifted dramatically with the regional elections in Andalusia on 2 December 2018, held against a backdrop of profound national political upheaval. Earlier that year, on 25 May 2018, Pedro Sánchez had become Prime Minister following the first successful motion of no confidence in Spain's democratic history, prompted by the *Gürtel* corruption case that had severely damaged the credibility of the PP. At the same time, political tensions remained high due to the Catalan crisis, particularly the referendum of 1 October 2017 and the subsequent unilateral declaration of independence. The suspension of Catalan autonomy generated widespread discontent among sectors of the Spanish electorate—sentiments that Vox was able to mobilise and politicise to its advantage (Santana, Rama Castaño, 2019).

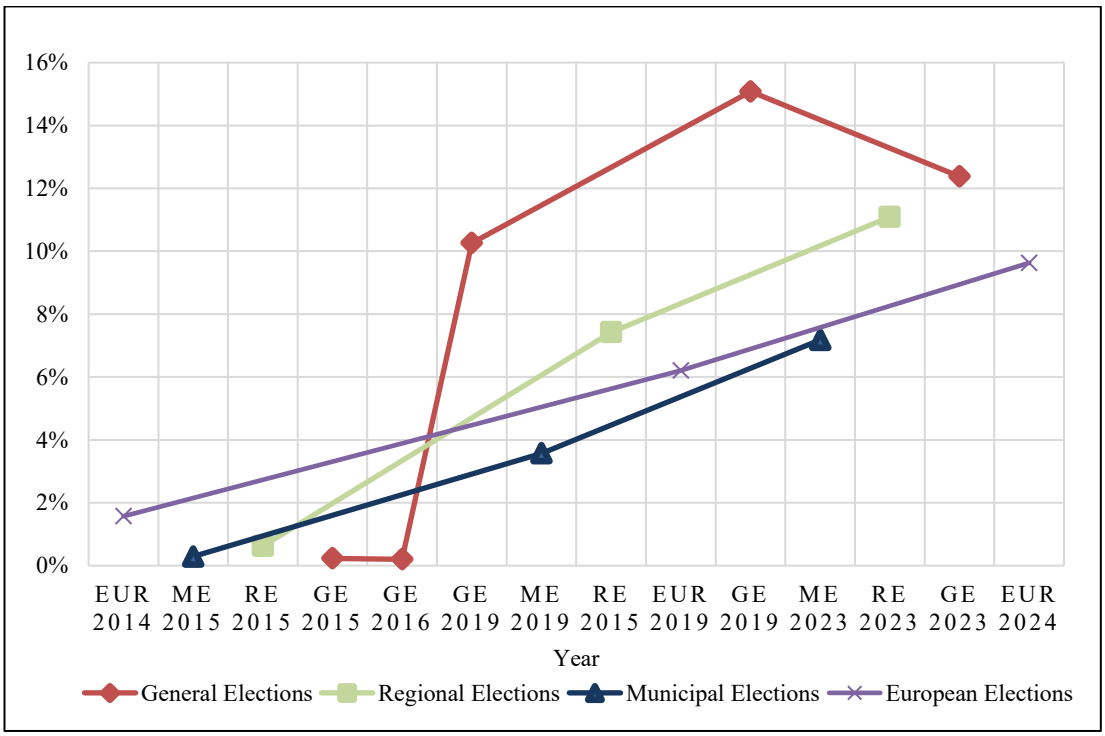
Table 4. Vox´s results in general, regional, municipal and European elections (2014-2024)

Year	Election	Votes	% Votes	Seats / Councillors
2014	European Elections	246,833	1.57%	0 / 54
2015	Municipal Elections	64,385	0.29%	22 / 67,515
2015	Regional Elections (10 regions)	75,486	0.62%	0 / 620
2015	General Elections	58,114	0.23%	0 / 350
2016	General Elections	47,182	0.20%	0 / 350
2018	Andalusian Elections	395,978	10.97%	12 / 109
2019	General Elections (April)	2,688,092	10.26%	24 / 350
2019	European Elections	1,338,681	6.20%	4 / 59
2019	Regional Elections (15 regions)	963,259	7.42%	45 / 886
2019	Municipal Elections	659,736	3.56%	530 / 66,787
2019	General Elections (November)	3,656,979	15.08%	52 / 350
2020	Galician Elections	27,667	2.03%	0 / 75
2020	Basque Elections	18,517	1.96%	1 / 75
2021	Catalan Elections	217,883	7.69%	11 / 135
2021	Madrid Elections	333,403	9.15%	13 / 136
2022	Castilla y León Elections	212,605	17.64%	13 / 81
2022	Andalusian Elections	493,932	13.46%	14 / 109
2023	Municipal Elections	1,605,961	7.19%	1,671 / 66,976
2023	Regional Elections (14 regions)	1,074,154	11.09%	68 / —
2023	General Elections	3,057,000	12.40%	33 / 350
2024	Galician Elections	32,493	2.19%	0 / 75

2024	Basque Elections	21,396	2.03%	1 / 75
2024	Catalan Elections	248,554	7.96%	11 / 135
2024	European Elections	1,688,255	9.63%	6 / 61

Source: Author´s own elaborations from data of Ministerio del Interior (2014,2015,2016,2018,2019a,2019b, 2019c,2020,2021,2022,2023,2024,2025).

Figure 2. Evolution of Vox's results in general, regional, municipal and European elections (2014–2024)



Source Author´s own elaborations from data of Ministerio del Interior (2015, 2016, 2019a, 2019b,2023).

Note: Percentages correspond to national-level vote shares in each type of election. GE = General Elections; RE = Regional Elections; ME = Municipal Elections; EUR = European Elections.

From this juncture, Vox moved from electoral marginality to a phase of rapid expansion and organisational consolidation. A key development was the revision of the party's statutes to centralise decision-making, including the elimination of primary elections for candidate selection at all levels—European, regional, municipal, and general. At the same time, Vox extended its territorial presence to nearly all Spanish provinces, with the exception of Galicia, the Basque Country, Navarra, and the Canary Islands. This period also witnessed the gradual normalisation of the party's presence in mainstream media.

The general election of 28 April 2019, triggered by parliamentary rejection of the General State Budget, marked Vox's breakthrough into the national legislature. The party secured 24 seats and 10.26 per cent of the vote—an exponential increase from its 0.2 per cent share in the 2016 general election. This outcome effectively shattered Spain's so-called "Iberian exception," aligning it with broader European trends in which PRR parties have gained significant institutional footholds.

Vox's upward trajectory was confirmed in the municipal, regional, and European elections of 26 May 2019. Although its performance was slightly weaker than in April, the party emerged as a pivotal actor in the formation of right-wing governments across several regions and municipalities. It played a decisive role in establishing conservative administrations in Murcia, the Community of Madrid, and in cities such as Zaragoza, Granada, Palencia, Teruel, Badajoz, El Ejido, and Roquetas de Mar

As Abascal declared at the time:

"Vox is going to make its votes count. We will not accept cordons sanitaires, insults, or stigmas. If they want to govern, they will have to negotiate with us." (El País, 2019)

The inability of the PSOE to form a government led to the dissolution of the Cortes and the calling of new elections on 10 November 2019. These elections consolidated Vox as the dominant force on Spain's PRR. The party secured 3,656,979 votes (15.08 per cent) and 52 seats, becoming the third-largest political force in the country. Within a single year, Vox had shifted from relative obscurity to a central actor in Spanish politics, benefitting from considerable media visibility and parliamentary influence.

This momentum was reinforced in subsequent regional elections in the Basque Country (July 2020), Catalonia (February 2021), and the Community of Madrid (May 2021)—with the notable exception of Galicia, where the PP's entrenched dominance prevented Vox from entering the regional parliament.

The year 2020 marked a decisive shift in Vox's discursive strategy, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The party adopted an explicitly confrontational tone, intensifying its delegitimisation of state institutions and the executive branch. It repeatedly described the Sánchez government as "illegitimate," "treacherous," "criminal," and "fraudulent." At the same time, Vox reoriented its

communications strategy by prioritising social media while portraying mainstream outlets as complicit with political elites and oligarchic interests (Lerín Ibarra, 2022). Fernández-Vázquez (2020) characterised this shift as the "Venezuelisation" of Vox—a reference to its adoption of the oppositional discourse traditionally employed by Venezuelan dissidents against the Maduro regime.

In parallel, Vox sought to broaden its appeal among working-class voters—an electorate where its support remained comparatively limited—through the launch of the trade union *Solidaridad* in September 2020. Inspired by Poland's *Solidarność*, this initiative was presented as an alternative to Spain's established trade unions. According to Santiago Abascal, *Solidaridad* aimed to "protect workers, their families, neighbourhoods, and Spanish industry from the unions, which are controlled by oligarchies and serve only those in power and their subsidies."

Vox's most significant institutional breakthrough occurred in March 2022, when it entered government in the autonomous community of Castilla y León through a coalition with the PP. Having secured 16 of the 81 seats in the February 2022 regional elections, Vox negotiated a coalition agreement that awarded it the regional vice-presidency, three ministerial portfolios, and the presidency of the regional parliament.

The municipal and regional elections of 28 May 2023 further consolidated Vox's territorial presence. The party obtained more than 1.6 million votes—over 7 per cent of the national total—and entered coalition governments with the PP in four autonomous communities: Extremadura, Aragón, Murcia, and the Valencian Community. In addition, Vox gained representation in numerous municipal governments, including major urban centres such as Valladolid, Valencia, Toledo, Burgos, Guadalajara, and Ciudad Real.

The incorporation of Vox into regional and local governments has produced a discernible policy shift, particularly in areas related to equality, diversity, and environmental sustainability. One recurrent measure has been the replacement of equality departments (*concejalías de igualdad*) with departments framed around "family" or "social services." This restructuring has resulted in the reduction or elimination of programmes for victims of gender-based violence, the cancellation

of awareness-raising initiatives, and a substantial decrease in public funding for feminist and LGBTQ+ associations.

Another contentious measure has been the removal of rainbow flags and other LGBTQ+ symbols from public buildings and institutions. In the cultural sphere, multiple instances of ideological censorship have been reported, including the cancellation of theatre performances, film screenings, and other artistic events. A particularly emblematic case was the suppression of *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, deemed inappropriate for children on the grounds of its exploration of gender identity.

In the area of urban mobility, Vox's participation in municipal governments has coincided with the dismantling or scaling back of cycle lanes and other infrastructure designed to promote sustainable transport. In addition, the implementation of Low Emission Zones (*Zonas de Bajas Emisiones*, ZBE)—mandated by European legislation and by Spain's Climate Change and Energy Transition Law for cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants—has been delayed, diluted, or suspended altogether in several municipalities governed by PP–Vox coalitions. In these cases, penalties have been eliminated and traffic restrictions relaxed, often framed by Vox and its allies as "revenue-raising" mechanisms or as unnecessary constraints on individual mobility.

Despite notable territorial gains at the municipal and regional levels, the general elections of July 2023 constituted a significant electoral setback for Vox. Although opinion polls had anticipated a reduction in its parliamentary presence, the party was nonetheless expected to retain strategic relevance as a potential coalition partner. The results, however, fell markedly short of expectations. Vox lost more than 600,000 votes and 19 parliamentary seats compared with the November 2019 elections, securing only 33 deputies. This decline substantially curtailed its legislative capacity, as the party no longer met the threshold of 35 deputies required to table motions of no confidence or to challenge legislation before the Constitutional Court. Moreover, Vox failed to win any directly elected senators, retaining only two seats in the Senate through regional appointment (Kassam, 2023).

The 2023 electoral campaign was defined by Vox's proposals to repeal landmark progressive legislation, including the Gender Violence Law, the Equal Marriage

Law, the Law on Sexual Freedom, the Trans Law, and existing provisions on abortion rights. This agenda reflected both the symbolic and substantive measures promoted in regional governments where Vox held office and encapsulated the party's broader ideological orientation. However, such hardline rhetoric likely alienated centrist and moderate voters, who perceived the platform as excessively radical. At the same time, a highly mobilised progressive electorate—particularly during the final week of the campaign—proved decisive in shaping the outcome (Civicus, 2023).

In contrast to the 2019 elections, which were dominated by the Catalan crisis, the 2023 campaign unfolded in a comparatively stabilised political context. Many voters who had previously defected to Vox returned to the PP, which, under the leadership of Alberto Núñez Feijóo, successfully positioned itself as the "useful vote" of the right. The PP secured 136 seats (33.05 per cent of the vote), surpassing the PSOE's 122, while maintaining significant programmatic convergence with Vox throughout the campaign (Ministerio del Interior, 2023).

3.2.5 First major crisis and strategic reorientation (post 2023): electoral decline, internal fractures and ideological hardening

The general elections of July 2023 marked a critical juncture in Vox's political trajectory, initiating a phase of electoral decline and organisational instability. The party suffered a significant setback, losing 19 parliamentary seats and approximately half a million votes compared with the previous electoral cycle. Its representation in the Congress of Deputies fell from 52 to 33 seats, severely limiting its legislative capacity. This contraction carried important institutional implications: Vox no longer met the thresholds required to file appeals before the Constitutional Court (50 deputies) or to table motions of no confidence (35 deputies), thereby significantly reducing its parliamentary leverage.

The electoral decline also produced tangible material repercussions. In Spain, public financing for political parties is directly tied to parliamentary representation. Following the 2023 elections, Vox was allocated €364,152 annually for parliamentary group operations, in addition to €698,416 based on its 33 seats—amounting to €1,055,568 per year. By comparison, in the previous legislature the party had received €1,089,504 solely from its 52 seats. The near equivalence of the two sums is explained by the combined effect of group- and seat-based subsidies,

yet the comparison highlights the financial pressures generated by diminished parliamentary strength (Galaup & Moraga, 2023).

Simultaneously, Vox experienced growing internal fragmentation, exposing deeper ideological and organisational rifts. The party became increasingly polarised between two principal factions. The dominant current, led by Santiago Abascal, advanced a hardline nationalist agenda inspired by the models of illiberal democracies in Hungary and Poland. By contrast, a more economically liberal and institutionally pragmatic faction—personified by Iván Espinosa de los Monteros—advocated a more moderate discourse and greater strategic flexibility. Although re-elected in July 2023, Espinosa declined to take up his parliamentary seat, officially citing personal reasons; however, multiple sources attributed his decision to unresolved internal conflicts and growing disillusionment with the party's trajectory.

His departure reflected a broader pattern of attrition within Vox's senior leadership. Prominent figures such as Macarena Olona—formerly the party's spokesperson in the Congress and one of its most recognisable public faces—and Rubén Manso—the architect of its ultra-liberal economic platform—had already left the party. These exits signalled not only personal disaffection but also deeper ideological disagreements and frustration with the party's strategic direction. At the same time, the influence of long-standing figures such as Víctor Sánchez del Real waned. The replacement of Javier Ortega Smith as organisational secretary by Ignacio Garriga—a close ally of Jorge Buxadé—marked an internal realignment. Further signs of fragmentation emerged with the resignation of Rocío Monasterio, then regional leader in Madrid and spouse of Espinosa de los Monteros, following her removal from the leadership post. The subsequent resignation of Juan García-Gallardo, Vice-President of the Junta of Castile and León, reinforced the perception of internal disarray. Taken together, these departures underscored a crisis of authority and an increasing lack of strategic coherence.

Amidst this turbulence, Vox nevertheless achieved a relatively strong result in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Under the leadership of Jorge Buxadé, the party secured 1,678,218 votes (9.62 per cent) and doubled its representation from three to six MEPs—four of whom had already held seats following the post-Brexit

redistribution. This outcome consolidated Vox's position as the third-largest Spanish delegation in the European Parliament.

Shortly thereafter, in July 2024, Santiago Abascal announced the unilateral termination of Vox's coalition agreements with the PP in five autonomous communities—Castile and León, the Valencian Community, Murcia, Aragón, and Extremadura. The rupture followed the PP's endorsement of a national initiative to redistribute unaccompanied migrant minors across Spain's regions, introduced in response to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Canary Islands. Vox framed the policy as a betrayal of shared principles, accusing the PP of capitulating to "socialist" agendas and enabling what it described as de facto open-border policies.

As Jorge Buxadé declared:

"They have no intention of stopping illegal immigration. Von der Leyen colludes with Pedro Sánchez to disperse illegal immigrants. Feijóo joins them." (Vox España, 2023)

Buxadé emerged as a central figure in this ideological reorientation. In addition to leading Vox's European campaign, he became the principal advocate of the party's shift from neoconservatism towards a more identitarian-nationalist orientation. Anti-immigration discourse became the defining element of Vox's platform, articulated in increasingly overtly xenophobic and exclusionary terms. Whereas the party had previously focused on traditional right-wing issues in the Spanish context—such as opposition to the left, historical memory laws, and peripheral nationalisms—it now embraced a broader anti-globalist perspective. This encompassed harsh criticism of the European Union, multiculturalism, and what Vox labelled the "progressive elites of Brussels." Concurrently, the party began to engage with far-right conspiracy theories such as the "Great Replacement" and to question the continued relevance of the conventional left–right political axis.

his ideological evolution culminated in Vox's withdrawal from the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group—traditionally associated with institutional right-wing forces—and its accession to the newly established *Patriots for Europe* bloc, spearheaded by Viktor Orbán and Marine Le Pen. The latter grouping is characterised by a more radical, sovereigntist, and anti-establishment orientation. Vox's alignment with *Patriots for Europe* formalised its ideological

reorientation and repositioned the party as a more confrontational and uncompromising actor within both the Spanish and European political arenas.

The rise of *The Party is Over* (*Se Acabó la Fiesta*, SALF) further intensified pressure on Vox from its radical flank. Alvise Pérez's populist, anti-elite, and explicitly anti-political rhetoric resonated with segments of the electorate who increasingly perceived Vox as institutionalised and detached from its initial insurgent posture. During the 2024 European campaign, Pérez pledged to raffle his MEP salary and advanced anti-system messages that challenged both mainstream and radical right parties alike.

Ultimately, Vox's entry into *Patriots for Europe* and its rupture with the PP crystallised a decisive transformation in the party's strategic and ideological identity. Abandoning coalition politics and embracing an explicitly anti-globalist discourse, the party sought to reclaim ground ceded to more radical challengers. This shift was driven by the interplay between internal ideological realignment and external electoral pressures, placing Vox on a trajectory marked by escalating polarisation, growing isolation, and an increasingly adversarial posture towards the Spanish political system (Bordel Gil, 2024).3.3 Poland´s party-system evolution since the demise of communism (1989-2024).

3.3.1 Democratic transition and systemic volatility (1989-2005): fragmentation in the post-communist party system

Poland's political transformation began in 1989, signalling the end of several decades under a Soviet-backed authoritarian single-party regime. The communist system—initially established in the aftermath of the Second World War and formally institutionalised as the Polish People's Republic (PRL) through the 1952 Constitution—remained in place until the negotiated collapse of communism. This political rupture initiated a transition towards liberal democracy, progressively characterised by the separation of powers, political pluralism, and increasing party-system fragmentation (Ślarzynski, 2023). The institutional reconfiguration of the post-authoritarian state was shaped by the adoption of a parliamentary–cabinet system combined with a strengthened presidency. This dual executive arrangement played a pivotal role in stabilising the emerging democratic framework. The transition to a competitive multi-party system, broadly modelled on Western liberal-democratic norms, was further consolidated with the promulgation of the

Constitution of the Republic of Poland on 2 April 1997, which enshrined democratic principles and aligned the country's institutional architecture with European standards (Jaskiernia, 2017).

The immediate post-communist period was marked by pronounced volatility, acute fragmentation, and weak party discipline (Gwiazda, 2009) (see Table 5). The first fully free elections in 1991 were held under a highly permissive proportional representation (PR) system, with no electoral threshold, the use of the Saint-Laguë method for seat allocation, and relatively large electoral districts. This institutional design resulted in extreme party fragmentation: no party secured a majority, and 29 political formations gained parliamentary representation. The Democratic Union emerged as the largest party with only 12.31 per cent of the vote. This systemic instability culminated in the complete fall of Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka's government following a vote of no confidence in May 1993, leading President Lech Wałęsa to dissolve the Sejm and call early elections (Jaskiernia, 2017).

In effort to mitigate this fragmentation and enhance governability, substantial electoral reforms were introduced in 1993These included the establishment of a 5 per cent national threshold for individual parties and an 8 per cent threshold for coalitions, the introduction of a National List allocating 69 seats to parties receiving over 7 per cent of the national vote, an increase in the number of electoral districts from 37 to 52, and the adoption of the d'Hondt method for seat allocation. While these measures succeeded in reducing party system fragmentation, they also increased disproportionality, making parliamentary entry more difficult for smaller parties (Markowski, 2006).

The impact of these reforms was far-reaching. Several right-wing parties—despite collectively garnering close to 35 per cent of the vote—failed to meet the new thresholds and were excluded from parliamentary representation. This electoral exclusion facilitated the return to power of post-communist forces, particularly the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which secured 20.41 per cent of the vote. The SLD benefited from the redistribution of votes cast for parties that failed to cross the threshold, thereby consolidating its parliamentary dominance. The newly formed legislature was entrusted with drafting the Constitution, which was formally adopted in April 1997.

The 1997 parliamentary elections marked a turning point in Poland's post-communist political development. They ended the dominance of the post-communist left and facilitated the resurgence of political forces associated with the *Solidarność* movement. The Electoral Action of Solidarity (*Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność*, AWS), a coalition of right-wing parties, won 33.83 per cent of the vote and 201 seats in the Sejm. Jerzy Buzek was appointed Prime Minister and formed a coalition government with the Freedom Union (*Unia Wolności*, UW), granting the coalition an absolute majority of 261 seats (Jaskiernia, 2017).

Despite AWS's electoral success, the anticipated consolidation of the party system into two dominant blocs failed to materialise. The post-*Solidarność* right remained fragmented, ideologically incoherent, and plagued by intra-party disputes and weak parliamentary discipline. The UW withdrew from the coalition in June 2000, and by the end of the legislative term, AWS had lost a substantial number of deputies, with its parliamentary representation falling from 201 to 134. The Buzek government's declining popularity and widely perceived ineffectiveness further exacerbated internal divisions. Several high-profile figures defected to establish new parties—including PO, PiS, and the LPR—a development that underscored the enduring volatility of the Polish party system.

The 2001 parliamentary elections represented a critical juncture in the evolution of Poland's political landscape. The SLD, in coalition with the Labour Union (*Unia Pracy*, UP), emerged as the dominant force, winning 41 per cent of the vote and 216 seats (Millard, 2003). This outcome signalled the return of the post-communist left, now rebranded as a modern social-democratic force.

Simultaneously, the elections marked the collapse of the AWS–UW governing coalition. Both parties failed to meet the electoral threshold, securing only 5.6 per cent and 3.1 per cent of the vote respectively—an outcome that effectively ended the political dominance of the *Solidarność*-rooted bloc (Szczerbiak, 2002). A defining feature of the 2001 elections was the emergence of several new political actors, reflecting both the fragmentation of the centre-right and the growing complexity of the Polish electorate.

Among the most significant were PO, which obtained 12.7 per cent of the vote and 65 seats; PiS, with 9.5 per cent and 44 seats; *Samoobrona*, with 10.2 per cent and 53 seats; and the LPR, with 7.9 per cent and 38 seats. This electoral diversification

signalled a reconfiguration of the post-communist party landscape and reflected evolving ideological cleavages, as parties sought to adapt to an increasingly pluralistic and demanding electorate (Markowski, 2006).

Table 5. Government Formation in poland (1989-2024*)*

Term Sejm	Years	Government type	Governing party/coalition	Prime Minister	Seats	% Seats	External support	Months
Contract Sejm	1989–1991	MCG	Solidarity + PZPR allies	Mazowiecki / Bielecki / Olszewski / Suchocka	n/a	n/a	Yes	29
First Term Sejm	1991 – 1993	MCG	Centre-right coalitions (UD, KLD, PSL, others)	Olszewski/ Pawlak/ Suchocka	n/a	n/a	Yes	23
Second Term Sejm	1993 – 1997	MCG	SLD + PSL	Pawlak / Oleksy / Cimoszewicz	171 + 132	37.2 + 28.7	No	48
Third Term Sejm	1997 – 2001	MCG	AWS + UW	Buzek	201 + 60	43.7 + 13.0	No	48
Fourth Term Sejm	2001 – 2005	MCG	SLD + PSL (later with UP)	Miller / Belka	216 + 42	47.0 + 9.1	No	48
Fifth Term Sejm	2005 – 2007	MCG	PiS + LPR + Samoobrona	Marcinkiewicz / Jarosław Kaczyński	151 + 29+ 41	33.7 + 7.4 + 12.2	No	24
Sixth Term Sejm	2007 – 2011	MCG	PO + PSL	Tusk	209 + 31	45.4 + 6.7	No	48
Seventh Term Sejm	2011 – 2015	MCG	PO + PSL	Tusk / Kopacz	207 + 28	45.0 + 6.1	No	48
Eighth Term Sejm	2015 – 2019	SPMG	PiS	Szydło / Morawiecki	235	51.1	No	48
Ninth Term Sejm	2019 – 2023	SPMG	PiS	Morawiecki	235	51.1	No	48
Tenth Term Sejm	2023 –	MCG	KO + Trzecia Droga + Lewica	Tusk	157 + 65 + 26	34.1 + 14.1 + 5.6	No	n/a

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the National Electoral Commission (PKW), 1989–2024.

Note: SPMG = Single-party majority government; MCG = multi-party coalition government

3.3.2 Towards bipolarisation (2005-2024): the consolidation of two-party dominance within a multiparty system

The early 21st century witnessed profound transformations in Poland's party system. The initial years were characterised by political turbulence, frequent changes in government, and the rise of several short-lived political parties. However, since 2005, Poland's political landscape has been predominantly shaped by two major parties: PiS and PO. While these parties have maintained a dominant position, smaller parties have continued to play a significant role in coalition-building and ensuring parliamentary majorities.

Poland's contemporary party system stands in stark contrast to the highly fragmented landscape of the 1990s.Utilising Maurice Duverger's typology, it exhibits a "two-party tendency". According to Alan Siaroff's classification, Poland aligns with a "two-and-a-half party system," in which two dominant parties' control between 80% and 95% of parliamentary seats (Siaroff, 2018). This classification reflects the nuanced character of Poland's political system, where PiS and PO dominate national politics while smaller parties influence governance dynamics.

Since 2005, the combined vote share of PO, PiS, and their electoral allies has grown significantly, rising from 51.12 % in 2005 to 66.1% in 2023 (National Electoral Office of Poland, 2024). Members of these two parties are now widely regarded as the only viable candidates for the premiership, relegating smaller parties to junior roles within governing coalitions (see Table 6).

Table 6. Party fragmentation in post-1989 Poland

	1991	1993	1997	2001	2005	2007	2011	2015	2019	2023
Number of parties elected to Sejm	29	6	5	6	6	4	5	5	6	5
Share of votes won by two largest parties (%)	24.31	35.81	60.96	53.72	51.12	73.62	69.07	61.67	70.99	66.1
Share of seats won by two largest parties (%)	25.52	65.87	79.35	61.09	62.6	81.52	79.13	81.09	80.22	76.3

Source: Markowski and Cześnik (2002) and authors' calculations based on data from the National Electoral Office of Poland.

Beyond national politics, PiS and PO have also entrenched their dominance in regional governance. Between 2006 and 2024, their combined representation in *voivodeship sejmiks* (regional assemblies) increased from 63% to 81.34% (National Electoral Office of Poland, 2024). In seven of Poland's sixteen *voivodeships*, one of these two parties has secured an absolute majority—PiS in six and PO in one. At the local level, the political competition between PiS and PO is asymmetrical. Historically, PiS has underperformed in municipal elections, whereas PO has garnered substantial support in urban centres. Notably, five of Poland's ten largest cities—Warsaw, Krakow, Łódź, Poznań, and Bydgoszcz—are governed by PO-affiliated mayors. The remaining major cities are led by independents with centrist or centre-left leanings, often endorsed by PO. Significantly, PiS does not govern any of Poland's ten largest cities, underscoring its limited appeal in urban and densely populated areas.

Poland's electoral geography reflects a core–periphery divide. Urban centres tend to support economically liberal and culturally progressive parties, while rural areas and smaller towns favour socially conservative ones. This divide is rooted in Poland's historical and cultural legacies, including the partitions (1772–1918) and post-Second World War territorial shifts. Additional reinforcing factors include the presence of ethnic and religious minorities, who are generally less supportive of conservative politics. The persistence of this urban–rural cleavage intensifies political polarisation (Adamiak et al., 2024).

The gradual consolidation of Poland's party system into a two-party format has contributed to greater political stability, yet it has also intensified ideological polarisation. PiS and PO both initially emerged as centre-right formations and were widely regarded as potential coalition partners. In the 2002 local elections, the two parties even presented a joint list of candidates in several capital voivodeships, with the notable exception of Warsaw. In the capital, each party fielded its own candidate for mayor: Andrzej Olechowski for PO and Lech Kaczyński for PiS. However, by the 2005 national elections—despite public declarations of mutual interest in forming a coalition committed to transparency, anti-corruption, and the dismantling of clientelist structures—intensified electoral competition led to a decisive rupture. The two parties entered into direct conflict, gradually transforming from potential allies into ideological adversaries (Markowski, 2006).

In the 2005 parliamentary elections, PiS secured victory with 26.99% of the vote and 155 seats, compared to PO's 24.14% and 133 seats. Following the elections, coalition negotiations between the two parties ultimately failed, and PO was unable to form an alternative government. Consequently, PiS established a minority government under the leadership of Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz. This decision was shaped by Jarosław Kaczyński's reluctance to assume the premiership himself, as he sought to avoid jeopardising his brother Lech's prospects in the concurrent presidential elections. However, the government soon faced political instability, exacerbated by internal conflicts and mounting controversies involving the Kaczyński brothers. This culminated in Marcinkiewicz's resignation in 2006 and the calling of early elections in 2007.

In the 2007 parliamentary elections, the PO, led by Donald Tusk, defeated PiS with 41.51% of the vote compared to PiS's 31.11%. Tusk subsequently became Prime Minister and governed for eight years in coalition with the centrist Polish People's Party (PSL). During this period, PiS consolidated its position as the principal opposition force, and the ideological divide between the two parties deepened (Antoszewski, 2008). The political landscape became increasingly polarised, with PO advancing a liberal, market-oriented, and pro-European agenda, while PiS embraced cultural conservatism, economic interventionism, and pronounced Euroscepticism (Zarycki, 2015). PiS also increasingly adopted radical right-wing populist themes, including anti-elitism, nationalism, anti-immigration and anti-Islamic rhetoric, opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, scepticism towards green transition policies, and the propagation of conspiracy narratives—particularly those surrounding the 2010 Smolensk plane crash (Adamiak et al., 2024).

The 2015 parliamentary represented a decisive shift in the party system, as PiS secured an absolute majority in the Sejm, becoming the first party in post-communist Poland to govern alone, with just 37.58% of the vote. The election underscored the electorate's polarisation into two roughly equal blocs: one nationalist-populist and the other centrist-liberal. It also highlighted the continued fragmentation of the left, which failed to gain representation due to wasted votes, estimated at approximately 12% of the total vote share. Moreover, the results illustrated the openness of Poland's party system to new political movements, exemplified by Kukiz'15—a populist party that combined radical anti-elitism,

institutional rejection, and economic nationalism—securing nearly 9% of the vote, winning 42 seats, and emerging as the third-largest political force in the Sejm (Markowski, 2016).

The 2015 parliamentary elections marked a significant turning point, PiS secured an outright majority in the Sejm—becoming the first party in post-communist Poland to govern alone—with 37.58% of the vote. The result underscored a deepening polarisation of the electorate into two roughly equal blocs: one nationalist-populist and the other centrist-liberal. It also highlighted the persistent fragmentation of the left, which failed to gain parliamentary representation due to an estimated 12% of the vote being wasted on parties that did not surpass the electoral threshold. Furthermore, the outcome illustrated the continued openness of Poland's party system to new political entrants, exemplified by Kukiz'15—a populist formation combining radical anti-elitism, institutional scepticism, and economic nationalism—which secured nearly 9% of the vote, winning 42 seats and emerging as the third-largest force in the Sejm (Markowski, 2016).

In 2019, Konfederacja (Confederation)—a coalition of far-right, ultra-nationalist, and economically libertarian groups formed in 2018—entered parliament for the first time. With 6.81% of the vote and 11 seats, it distinguished itself by attracting disproportionate support among younger voters (Markowski, 2020).

The parliamentary elections of 15 October 2023 marked another critical juncture in Polish politics, bringing to an end eight years of PiS rule. With a record turnout of 74%—the highest since 1989—the elections signalled a major shift in electoral mobilisation. Whereas previous cycles had been characterised by the overrepresentation of conservative and religious constituencies, whose influence appeared to be waning, the liberal-democratic bloc successfully reactivated its electoral base, collectively securing 13.2 million votes. Of these, 11.6 million were cast in favour of the four main opposition parties, which subsequently reached an agreement to form a coalition government.

The results reflected a fragmented yet realigned party system and confirmed a clear erosion of PiS's hegemony. Although it remained the most voted-for party, its support declined to 35.38%, translating into 194 seats—a significant drop from the 235 seats obtained in 2019. In contrast, the Civic Coalition (KO), led by PO, secured

30.7% of the vote and 157 seats, consolidating its position as the principal alternative for governance.

A key actor in the reconfiguration of Poland's party system was the Third Way coalition, comprising Polska 2050 and the PSL. The alliance obtained 14.4% of the vote and 65 seats, effectively preventing a third consecutive term for PiS and underscoring the strategic relevance of tactical voting in a proportional electoral system with high thresholds for coalitions (Markowski, 2024). The left-wing bloc—formed around the SLD alongside Razem and Wiosna—experienced a modest decline, securing 8.61% of the vote and 26 seats. Meanwhile, the ultranationalist Konfederacja maintained its parliamentary presence, receiving 7.16% of the vote and 18 seats.

Looking retrospectively, the 2019 parliamentary elections had already marked a pivotal moment in Polish politics. With a turnout of nearly 62%—the highest recorded since 1989—PiS consolidated its dominance, securing 43.6% of the vote (the highest vote share in the history of post-communist parliamentary elections) and 235 out of 460 seats, achieving a parliamentary majority with 51.1% of the seats. A defining feature of the 2019 Sejm composition was that all five successful political entities were electoral coalitions rather than standalone parties. This structural shift contributed to the lowest percentage of wasted votes ever recorded in a Polish national election

The main challenger to PiS, the centre-right KO, led by PO, formed an electoral alliance with the Greens, the liberal Nowoczesna, and the Polish Initiative. This coalition secured 27.2% of the vote, marking a 3-point increase compared to the previous election, in which PO had contested independently. However, unlike the 2019 European Parliament elections—when a broader and more electorally effective coalition that included PSL was established—the Left opted to contest the parliamentary elections as a separate bloc.

Having been excluded from the Sejm in the previous term due to strategic miscalculations, the left-wing parties regrouped under the SLD label, forming a coalition that included Wiosna (Spring) and Razem (Together). This alliance presented a multidimensional leftist platform that combined traditional socialist economic policies with progressive stances on issues such as abortion rights and LGBTQ+ inclusion. This strategy enabled the Left to re-enter parliament with

12.56% of the vote, re-establishing its presence as a significant actor within Poland's increasingly fragmented but polarised party system.

Meanwhile, the Polish People's Party (PSL), historically a pivotal "kingmaker" in Polish politics and a frequent participant in governing coalitions, experienced a decline in influence due to the country's ongoing modernisation and urbanisation, which eroded its traditional rural base. In response to weak polling and declining support for Kukiz'15, the two parties joined forces under the Polish Coalition label. This coalition, which targeted rural voters, the moderately religious, and socio-culturally conservative groups, secured 8.55% of the vote and parliamentary presence, largely due to strong backing among younger voters (Markowski, 2024).

3.4 The rise of PiS: from post-solidarity conservatism to PRR consolidation

3.4.1 Origins and legacy (1991-2005): from the AWS collapse to the foundation of PiS

The history of PiS is inseparable from the trajectories of the Kaczyński brothers, Jarosław and Lech, who not only co-founded the party but also played a decisive role in shaping its ideological orientation and strategic dimension from the outset.

Both brothers were second-tier members of the democratic opposition—initially within the Workers' Defence Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, KOR) during the 1970s, and subsequently in the Solidarity (*Solidarność*) movement throughout the 1980s. By 1989, they were serving as advisers to Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa, who played a pivotal role in integrating them into national politics—an act he would later describe on several occasions as a political miscalculation. Between 1990 and 1991, Lech Kaczyński served as Deputy Chairman of the Solidarity Trade Union. Meanwhile, in 1990, Jarosław Kaczyński founded the Centre Agreement (*Porozumienie Centrum*, PC), a post-Solidarity conservative party that endorsed Wałęsa's successful bid for the presidency. By 1991, however, the relationship between the Kaczyński brothers and Wałęsa had deteriorated, culminating in open conflict. The brothers accused Wałęsa of collaborating too closely with former communist elites, thereby betraying the moral imperatives of the Solidarity movement.

In the 1991 parliamentary elections, PC secured 8.7% of the vote, obtaining 44 seats and briefly participating in the coalition government led by Prime Minister Jan

Olszewski. However, the party failed to pass the 5% electoral threshold in the 1993 elections, garnering only 4.4% of the vote and losing its parliamentary representation. Lech Kaczyński's candidacy in the 1995 presidential election attracted negligible public support, leading him to withdraw before the first round. By the mid-1990s, the Kaczyńskis had largely disappeared from the parliamentary arena: Lech was appointed President of the Supreme Audit Office (*Najwyższa Izba Kontroli*, NIK), while Jarosław sought to re-establish his political foothold.

In 1996, PC joined the AWS, an umbrella coalition comprising over thirty centre-right parties and trade unions. However, its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, chose not to run under the AWS banner in the 1997 parliamentary elections and instead stood as a candidate on the lists of Jan Olszewski's Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (ROP). Under the premiership of Jerzy Buzek, AWS governed from 1997 to 2001, implementing an ambitious programme of neoliberal 'shock therapy' reforms, including pension privatisation, healthcare decentralisation, and labour market liberalisation. However, the coalition began to disintegrate following the withdrawal of the UW from government in June 2000, leaving AWS as a fragile minority administration—a development that signalled its terminal decline.

During this period, the Kaczyński brothers remained broadly unpopular with the electorate. Nevertheless, they began recalibrating their political strategy around law-and-order themes. Although initially marginal, this rhetorical shift signalled the onset of a more populist and security-oriented trajectory. In 2000, Lech Kaczyński was unexpectedly appointed Minister of Justice in Buzek's AWS government. Despite his dismissal less than a year later, he succeeded in cultivating a public image as a determined and uncompromising opponent of crime and corruption.

PiS was formally registered as a political party in June 2001, inheriting the organisational remnants of PC and presenting itself as the conservative heir to the discredited AWS. In the parliamentary elections of that year, the party obtained 9.5% of the vote and 44 seats in the Sejm. While modest, this result marked PiS's arrival as a viable alternative to both the declining AWS and the ascendant liberal PO.

In its formative years, PiS portrayed itself as a mainstream centre-right party. This self-positioning was facilitated by the democratic credentials of its leadership, rooted in the anti-communist opposition and the Solidarity movement. The party's

early agenda centred on anti-corruption and public security, aligning it with the moral conservatism of post-Solidarity politics. Crucially, PiS initially distanced itself from the national-populist extremism associated with parties such as Samoobrona and the LPR. It refrained from questioning the foundations of liberal democracy, maintained a pro-Western foreign policy orientation, and supported Poland's accession to NATO and the European Union.

These formative years ilustrate how PiS capitalised on the vacuum created by the collapse of AWS and the fragmentation of the post-Solidarity right. By presenting itself as a mainstream, moderate conservative alternative, PiS avoided the marginalisation of parties such as Samoobrona and LPR and secured an durable foothold in the Polish party system. Its early success was therefore less the product of programmatic innovation than of favourable political opportunities generated by systemic volatility and the discrediting of existing right-wing formations (Pankowski, 2010).

3.4.2 Ideological shift and authoritarian turn (2005-2007): PiS in goverment

Since its foundation in 2001, PiS has undergone a profound transformation across multiple dimensions, including its rhetoric, policy agenda, ideological orientation, political alliances, sources of symbolic legitimacy, and electoral base. This ideological evolution became increasingly evident during the 2005 parliamentary elections, which saw PiS secure both executive offices of state. The process would intensify significantly in the years that followed.

During the 2005 electoral campaign, opinion polls suggested that PO and PiS were likely to form a coalition government. Under the anticipated arrangement, PO would control the presidency and key economic ministries, while PiS would oversee the so-called "power ministries." However, the unexpected weakness of the left—whose campaign was more a struggle for parliamentary survival than a genuine bid for power—and the withdrawal of Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz from the presidential race disrupted this political arithmetic. In the aftermath, both PO and PiS reassessed their strategic positioning, ultimately becoming political adversaries rather than coalition partners.

In this context, PiS redefined the primary axis of political competition by introducing a new cleavage between "liberals" and "solidarists." This reframing was underpinned by an unprecedented critique of Poland's post-1989

transformation, which PiS condemned as excessively liberal and socially unjust. The party attributed the perceived failures of the post-communist order to liberal elites and framed itself as an anti-system force advocating structural rupture rather than the democratic continuity. This strategic recalibration proved electorally successful but came at the cost of abandoning PiS's earlier conservative-liberal programme in favour of a more radical nationalist-populist agenda (Markowski, 2006).

By 2005, PiS had begun to incorporate increasingly pronounced elements of populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism. Its rhetoric centred on the defence of national identity, opposition to Western liberalism, and the promotion of Catholic values. A party programme titled *A Catholic Poland in a Christian Europe* articulated Jarosław Kaczyński's vision of Christianity as the foundation of Polish national identity and warned of moral decline stemming from liberal European influences. The party advocated for a new constitution grounded in Catholic principles and explicitly rejected axiological neutrality. Kaczyński argued that any compromise between traditionalism and liberal relativism would inevitably lead to national decline. The proposed constitution omitted references to religious and ethnic minorities and sought to concentrate executive power—signalling a clear authoritarian turn.

Simultaneously, PiS advanced an exclusionary, ethno-religious conception of Polish identity. The party revived the term *Polonism*, defining national identity in narrowly ethnic and Catholic terms. In its 2005 manifesto, PiS warned of a "crisis of Polonism and patriotism", which it pledged to resolve through the "purification and strengthening of the state." This discourse implied a rejection of pluralism and portrayed certain groups—LGBTQ+ individuals, former communist elites, and liberal intellectuals—as existential threats to the national community. One of the government's first measures was the abolition of the Commissioner for the Equal Status of Women and Men, previously responsible for anti-discrimination policy. That same year, a peaceful anti-discrimination march in Poznań was violently repressed, with government officials justifying the crackdown by denouncing the organisers as promoters of "unacceptable" values.

The appointment of Roman Giertych as Minister of Education sparked widespread criticism due to his nationalist, clericalist, and illiberal views. Under his leadership,

the ministry launched a programme of "patriotic education" aimed at revising school curricula in line with nationalist narratives. The government censored teaching materials deemed "unpatriotic" and sought to legitimise creationism as an alternative to evolutionary theory in science education.

Throughout its time in office, PiS sought to consolidate control over key state institutions. It exerted direct pressure on the judiciary, compromised prosecutorial independence, and established the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau (Centralne Biuro Antykorupcyjne, CBA), which increasingly operated as a tool for targeting political opponents. Judicial independence was further undermined through sustained attacks on the Constitutional Tribunal, which frequently ruled against PiS-backed legislation.

The party also sought to dominate the public media sphere. Legislative reforms enabled PiS to control the State Radio and Television Council, replacing senior figures with loyalists, including individuals linked to far-right networks. Nationalist figures associated with extremist groups were appointed to editorial positions within state-run media outlets, accelerating the institutionalisation of PiS's nationalist-populist worldview.

The governing coalition between PiS, the far-right League of Polish Families (LPR), and Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Samoobrona) further entrenched this ideological shift. A key development was PiS's rapprochement with Radio Maryja, a Catholic-nationalist media outlet with significant influence over Poland's conservative electorate. Although previously critical of the station, Jarosław Kaczyński publicly reconciled with its leadership, recognising its strategic importance for mobilising right-wing support.

Over time, PiS gradually absorbed many politicians from LPR and Samoobrona, cementing its ideological realignment. The party increasingly deployed anti-German and anti-Russian rhetoric, portraying Poland as a besieged nation threatened by foreign interests. In parliamentary debates, PiS officials frequently accused journalists, academics, and political opponents of acting as agents of German or Russian influence, invoking conspiratorial narratives reminiscent of interwar nationalist discourse. This strategy consolidated its core base while exacerbating political polarisation along nationalist lines.

The government also adopted an openly sceptical stance towards European integration, portraying PiS as the guardian of Polish sovereignty against external imposition. President Lech Kaczyński's decision to boycott EU diplomatic meetings over perceived slights—including a satirical article in a German newspaper—exemplified the party's confrontational posture and its cultivation of national victimhood narratives (Pankowski, 2010).

The 2005–2007 period marked PiS's first decisive breakthrough, but also its departure from the conservative-liberal profile that had facilitated its initial acceptance within the party system. By reframing political competition around the liberal–solidarist divide and exploiting the weakness of the left, PiS transformed itself into a populist-nationalist challenger to PO. Although its radicalisation generated polarisation and coalition instability, it also consolidated a new axis of competition that would define Polish politics for the next two decade.

3.4.3 From setback to resurge (2007-2015): opposition, the Smolensk tragedy, and populist repositioning

The 2007 parliamentary elections marked a critical turning point for PiS, resulting in electoral defeat and initiating an eight-year period in opposition. The collapse of the PiS-led coalition government—comprising Samoobrona and LPR—was precipitated by political instability, internal conflict, governance failures, and mounting public dissatisfaction. The coalition was ideologically fragmented and frequently dysfunctional. The temporary withdrawal of Samoobrona in 2006 exposed the coalition's fragility, while PiS's attempts to consolidate executive power—most notably through the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau (CBA)—ultimately eroded its credibility. A particularly damaging episode was the attempted entrapment of Samoobrona leader Andrzej Lepper in a fabricated bribery case, leading to his dismissal and further discrediting the government.

PiS also faced mounting opposition from independent media and civil society. The tabloidisation of politics, initially advantageous to the party through sensationalist coverage in outlets such as *Fakt* and *Super Express*, eventually backfired. Investigative journalism revealed abuses of power, including illegal surveillance, politically motivated purges, and restrictions on dissent. Moreover, PiS's alliance with far-right elements alienated moderate voters. The appointment of Roman Giertych as Minister of Education, alongside other nationalist figures, provoked

backlash from intellectual and educational circles. Attempts to impose nationalist curricula were widely criticised, both domestically and internationally. The party's close alignment with *Radio Maryja* further deepened concerns about its ideological direction (Pankowski, 2010).

The 2007 elections recorded a historically high turnout of 53.9%, largely driven by the mobilisation of young voters and the Polish diaspora, particularly in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Donald Tusk's PO capitalised on popular dissatisfaction with PiS, promoting a platform of political reconciliation, economic competence, and moderation. PO won 41.5% of the vote, while PiS secured only 32.1%. Both LPR and Samoobrona failed to pass the electoral threshold and were consequently eliminated from parliament, marking the collapse of PiS's coalition allies (Markowski, 2008).

Despite its attempts to control key state institutions through judicial manipulation, politicisation of the public media, and controversial policies such as lustration, PiS had underestimated the resilience of Poland's democratic institutions and civil society. Its confrontational foreign policy—particularly towards the European Union, Germany, and Russia—further isolated the party on the international stage. The 2007 defeat thus marked not only a setback but also the beginning of a new phase in PiS's political evolution.

The opposition years (2007–2015) did not constitute a period of inactivity but rather one of ideological consolidation and strategic recalibration. PiS retained its nationalist-populist rhetoric but significantly reoriented its economic programme. Having previously adopted relatively pro-market positions, the party began to advocate protectionist and redistributive policies, borrowing rhetoric and proposals from the now-defunct Samoobrona party. This shift enabled PiS to appeal to voters disillusioned with the neoliberal trajectory of Poland's post-communist transformation. In contrast to PO's vision of a "liberal Poland," PiS presented itself as a defender of the economically marginalised, criticising deregulation, labour market precarity, and austerity.

In parallel, PiS intensified its anti-establishment discourse, constructing a narrative that portrayed Poland's liberal elites as complicit in a system of political and economic exclusion. Communism and liberalism were increasingly equated as twin threats to national sovereignty. This narrative resonated with segments of the

electorate alienated by post-1989 reforms and contributed to PiS's growing appeal as a "patriotic" alternative to what it framed as an arrogant and detached elite.

Internal party dynamics also played a critical role in this radicalisation. Originally a relatively moderate conservative formation, PiS evolved into a personalist party centred on Jarosław Kaczyński. Leadership became increasingly autocratic, with ideological conformity and loyalty rewarded over internal pluralism. This leader-centric model facilitated the party's transformation but also narrowed its ideological space. The death of Kaczyński's twin brother, President Lech Kaczyński, in 2010 accelerated this process (Tworzecki, 2019).

PiS's stance towards the European Union also hardened during its years in opposition. Once moderately pro-European, the party adopted an increasingly Eurosceptic tone, criticising Brussels from nationalist, protectionist, and anti-neoliberal perspectives. Jarosław Kaczyński frequently expressed admiration for illiberal leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, holding them up as exemplars of strong national leadership.

The defining event of PiS's time in opposition was the Smolensk plane crash of 10 April 2010, which killed President Lech Kaczyński and 95 other high-ranking officials en route to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre. The location and timing of the crash, near the site of the Soviet atrocity, immediately imbued it with symbolic significance.

Official investigations conducted by both Russian and Polish authorities concluded that the crash resulted from pilot error in poor weather conditions. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the Polish public—around 26–28%—rejected these conclusions, believing in alternative explanations. PiS, under Jarosław Kaczyński's leadership, promulgated theories of foul play ranging from gross negligence to deliberate sabotage involving both Russian and Polish officials. Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz became the chief advocate of the theory that the aircraft had "disintegrated mid-air" due to an intentional explosion.

The Smolensk tragedy fundamentally reshaped Polish political discourse, initiating what scholars have termed the *emotionalisation of politics*. Monthly commemorations (*miesięcznice*) evolved into politically charged events, blending mourning with anti-government mobilisation. These rituals reinforced a narrative of national martyrdom and betrayal, with PiS casting itself as the sole custodian of

patriotic memory. The controversy surrounding the placement of a memorial cross outside the Presidential Palace crystallised wider societal divisions over secularism, memory, and identity.

PiS successfully instrumentalised the tragedy, portraying itself as the defender of national dignity and moral clarity in the face of a duplicitous liberal establishment. The PO government, by contrast, was accused of failing to honour the victims and of appeasing Russia. The Smolensk narrative not only reinforced PiS's nationalist-conservative identity but also deepened public scepticism towards liberal institutions and Poland's post-1989 political consensus.

Lech Kaczyński was gradually elevated to the status of national martyr, framed as the figure who "rekindled Poland's national consciousness and restored its honour." This narrative, combined with growing disenchantment with the PO government, laid the foundation for PiS's eventual return to power in 2015.

Importantly, the Smolensk myth did not dissipate after PiS's electoral victory. Under Defence Minister Macierewicz, the conspiracy theory was institutionalised. The names of the victims were read at major military events, and NATO was urged to conduct a new investigation. Macierewicz even declared the Smolensk crash to be the "first act of a Russian war against Poland." As Snyder (in Sadurski, 2019) astutely observes*:*

"After 2015, Smolensk became more important than the Katyn massacre that Polish leaders had sought to commemorate, more important than the Second World War, more important than the twentieth century."

PiS's years in opposition underscored the resilience of Polish democratic institutions but simultaneously created the conditions for the party's long-term consolidation. The collapse of its far-right allies and the decline of the post-communist left narrowed the party system to a bipolar configuration dominated by PiS and PO. By reorienting its economic agenda towards redistribution and embedding the Smolensk narrative into its political identity, PiS expanded its appeal beyond its core electorate and positioned itself as the principal alternative to the liberal status quo, thereby reinforcing its systemic centrality.

3.4.4 PiS´s second period in government (2015-2023): electoral victory and democratic backsliding

The victory of PiS in the 2015 Polish elections marked a pivotal moment in the country's political development, inaugurating a period of democratic backsliding that significantly altered the functioning of its liberal democratic system. Despite relatively stable economic performance during this period, PiS successfully mobilised the electorate by deploying a broad repertoire of populist appeals. These drew on cultural, social, and political anxieties that resonated deeply with key segments of Polish society.

A central pillar of PiS's electoral strategy was the manipulation of xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment. In the context of the 2015 European migrant crisis, the party capitalised on widespread fears by framing migrants and refugees as existential threats to Poland's national and cultural identity. Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS's leader, employed rhetoric linking migrants to security risks and cultural decay, thus reinforcing exclusionary narratives within a largely homogeneous society

Another significant factor underpinning PiS's electoral success was the widespread anti-elite sentiment prevalent among the electorate. After two terms in government, PO had become closely associated with corruption, technocratic governance, and a perceived detachment from ordinary citizens. The presidential campaign of Bronisław Komorowski reinforced this perception, as his apparent aloofness and lack of empathy alienated many voters. In contrast, PiS portrayed itself as the authentic representative of "real Poles," confronting a distant, cosmopolitan elite. This binary framing of "the people" versus "the elite" contributed to the party's populist appeal across diverse social groups.

PiS also benefited from widespread frustration with liberal constitutionalism. The party advanced a narrative in which legal norms and institutional checks were portrayed as impediments to the popular will. By positioning itself as a force capable of decisive action on behalf of its electorate, PiS cast liberal constitutionalism as antithetical to democracy and national sovereignty, thus legitimising its illiberal agenda.

Crucially, the party consolidated support among its core rural and conservative voter base by invoking themes of national pride, cultural preservation, and

traditional family values. PiS's strategic alignment with the Catholic Church further reinforced its moral and cultural legitimacy, as Church endorsement served to bolster the party's self-image as the defender of Christian civilisation in Poland.

A notable tactical innovation was Jarosław Kaczyński's decision to withdraw from the public spotlight during the electoral campaign, nominating Beata Szydło as the party's prime ministerial candidate. This allowed PiS to present a more moderate public face while maintaining internal unity under Kaczyński's undisputed leadership. His role as the "power behind the throne" ensured strategic coherence, enabling the party to expand its appeal beyond its traditional base while preserving ideological discipline (Sadurski, 2019).

Following its electoral triumph, PiS used its parliamentary majority to implement wide-ranging institutional reforms that systematically eroded democratic checks and balances. Although it lacked the supermajority required to amend the Constitution, PiS circumvented these constraints by exploiting ordinary legislative mechanisms. The most visible and controversial changes targeted the judiciary, particularly the Constitutional Tribunal (CT), but extended to parliament, the civil service, the media, the electoral system, and civil society organisations.

In parliament, the PiS government marginalised opposition parties by accelerating legislative procedures and manipulating parliamentary rules. It routinely relied on private members' bills to bypass standard consultation and scrutiny, including for major reforms affecting the judiciary. By 2016, more than 40% of all legislation was introduced through this mechanism—a dramatic departure from previous parliamentary norms. Additional measures to suppress parliamentary dissent included curtailing opposition MPs' speaking time, imposing gag orders, scheduling votes at short notice, and restricting the opposition's ability to submit amendments.

Simultaneously, PiS launched a far-reaching overhaul of the civil service, dismantling the meritocratic and politically neutral principles enshrined in the 1997 Constitution. Legislation passed on 30 December 2015 enabled political appointments to high-ranking administrative positions, effectively eliminating competitive recruitment procedures. As a result, numerous senior posts were filled by PiS loyalists, many of whom lacked relevant qualifications. By 2018, the party had enacted 37 personnel laws, allowing for extensive purges across public

institutions. These changes affected not only the civil service but also sectors such as education, public health, agriculture, and state-owned enterprises.

The media environment was similarly transformed. Public broadcasters were swiftly converted into instruments of government propaganda, with approximately 200 journalists dismissed and replaced by individuals affiliated with right-wing or pro-clerical outlets, especially those linked to Father Tadeusz Rydzyk's media empire. The National Broadcasting Council (KRRiTV) was restructured to ensure PiS control over both public and private media regulation. Independent outlets were increasingly targeted through administrative penalties and sanctions. A prominent example was the heavy fine imposed on TVN24 in December 2016 for its coverage of anti-government protests. In 2020, the state-controlled oil company PKN Orlen acquired Polska Press—Poland's largest regional media group—leading to the replacement of editors-in-chief with pro-government appointees. Editorial policy shifted markedly in favour of government narratives, and coverage of sensitive topics such as LGBTQ+ rights and migration was curtailed. Journalists faced mounting threats, harassment, and accusations of being "anti-Polish" or "foreign agents," while physical violence against media personnel during protests increased.

PiS also introduced electoral reforms that consolidated its grip on power. Changes to the composition of the National Electoral Commission (PKW)—previously comprised of judges—subordinated the institution to political appointees. Further concerns arose over the redrawing of electoral districts and the relaxation of vote validity criteria, which raised fears of gerrymandering and electoral manipulation.

Civil rights were curtailed through legislation that restricted the opposition's capacity to organise protests. A 2016 law granted precedence to "cyclical assemblies"—state-sponsored commemorations such as the monthly Smolensk marches—making it effectively illegal to hold counter-demonstrations at the same time or location. Consequently, opposition organisers encountered prohibitive administrative barriers and legal obstructions, further shrinking the space for dissent.

This increasingly repressive environment culminated in the suppression of mass protests in October 2020, following a Constitutional Tribunal ruling—issued by a body dominated by PiS nominees—that rendered nearly all abortions unconstitutional. The decision triggered nationwide demonstrations under the

Women's Strike banner. Police responded with mass arrests and prosecution of activists, while the government framed the protests as threats to public order. International human rights organisations condemned the crackdown, accusing PiS of systematically undermining women's rights.

In parallel, PiS intensified its campaign against LGBTQ+ communities. Beginning in 2019, numerous local governments declared themselves "LGBT-free zones," entrenching a climate of state-sponsored discrimination. Although some declarations were rescinded under EU pressure, the government continued to harass LGBTQ+ activists. In 2021, police arrested members of the *Stop Bzdurom* collective, while PiS pursued legislation to restrict same-sex partnerships and limit gender identity expression. In response, the EU suspended funding to regions enforcing such policies, reflecting the widening rift between Poland and European democratic norms.

In January 2018, the PiS government further restricted academic freedom through amendments to the statute of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). The new law, commonly referred to as "*Lex Gross*," criminalised public attribution of Holocaust-era crimes to the Polish nation. Widely seen as an attempt to curtail historical inquiry into Poland's complicity in wartime atrocities—such as the Jedwabne pogrom—the law provoked international criticism and was later amended. Nevertheless, its initial enactment demonstrated PiS's willingness to instrumentalise history for nationalist ends.

Under PiS rule, Poland's international standing deteriorated significantly. Ongoing confrontations with EU institutions overrule of law violations led to the suspension of funding and the imposition of financial penalties. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these authoritarian tendencies. The government adopted emergency measures that enabled it to govern by decree, circumventing parliamentary scrutiny and weakening horizontal accountability (Markowski, 2024).

3.4.5 The end of PiS´s rule and the reconfiguration of polish liberal democracy

The parliamentary elections held on 15 October 2023 represented a critical juncture in Poland's political trajectory, marking the end of eight consecutive years of rule by PiS. This period was marked by persistent challenges to liberal democratic norms, including the erosion of institutional checks and balances, the weakening of the separation of powers, and the illegitimate politicisation of the judiciary (Sadurski, 2019).

Voter turnout reached an unprecedented 74.38%—the highest recorded in the post-1989 period—with over 21.9 million citizens participating. While PiS obtained the largest share of the vote (35.38%) (Figure 4), it was closely followed by the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO) with 30.7%, the Third Way (Trzecia Droga) with 14.4%, and the New Left (Nowa Lewica) with 8.61%. For the first time since the democratic transition, however, PiS, although the most voted party, was unable to form a government. A formal coalition agreement between KO, the Third Way, and the New Left secured 248 seats —17 more than the 231 required for an absolute majority in the Sejm—facilitating the investiture of Donald Tusk as Prime Minister on 13 December 2023 (Markowski, 2024).

The initial phase of the new government has been defined by intense institutional confrontation with the President of the Republic, Andrzej Duda, who has made extensive use of his constitutional prerogatives to veto or delay key reforms. These efforts have significantly impeded the executive's attempts to dismantle the illiberal legacy of the PiS era.

Upon assuming office, the Tusk cabinet pledged to restore the rule of law and dismantle PiS's entrenched political control over critical institutions, including public media, the judiciary, and intelligence services. However, these reform initiatives have faced significant resistance from both the presidency and judicial bodies aligned with the previous government—particularly the Constitutional Tribunal and the National Council of the Judiciary.

Judicial reform has emerged as one of the most contentious areas. A primary focus has been the status of so-called "neo-judges"—magistrates appointed during PiS's tenure—and the restructuring of the Constitutional Tribunal, widely seen as a cornerstone of the former regime's legal architecture. Although Parliament has passed a series of legislative initiatives aimed at restoring judicial independence,

many have been vetoed or referred to the Constitutional Tribunal by President Duda, effectively paralysing their implementation. These institutional tensions have extended into the realm of foreign policy, with the President obstructing ambassadorial appointments proposed by the executive, thereby hampering the government's international agenda (Kaczyński & Dybka, 2024).

Despite these institutional blockades, the Tusk administration remains confident in its capacity to fully implement its reform programme following the presidential elections scheduled for May 2025, in which it hopes to elect a politically aligned head of state. This optimism has been reinforced by the outcome of the European Parliament elections in June 2024, where the Civic Coalition narrowly outperformed PiS—securing 37.1% of the vote and 21 MEPs, compared to PiS's 36.1% and 20 MEPs—thus consolidating its position as the leading democratic alternative to national-populism.

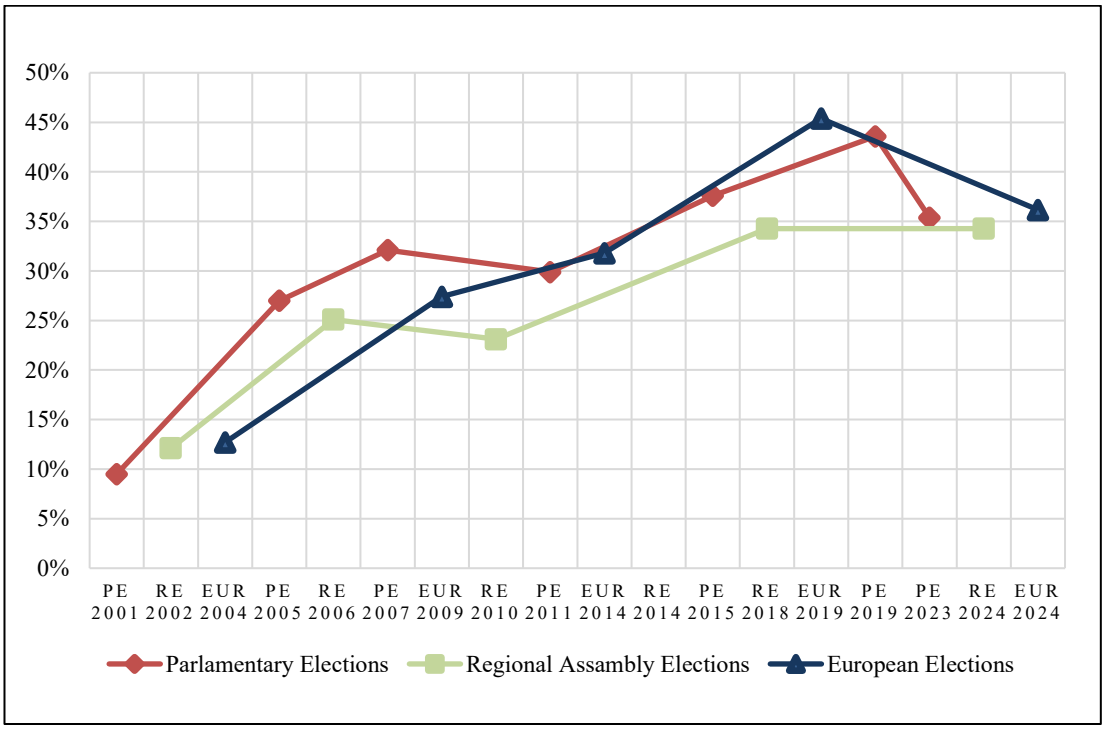
Table 7. PiS electoral results in parliamentary, regional and European elections (2001-2024)

Year	Election	Votes	% Votes	Seats
2001	Parliamentary Elections (Sejm)	1,236,787	9.5%	44 / 460
2002	Regional Assembly Elections	1,351,856	12.1%	79 / 561
2004	European Elections	771,858	12.7%	7 / 54
2005	Parliamentary Elections (Sejm)	3,187,295	27.0%	155 / 460
2006	Regional Assembly Elections	3,038,002	25.1%	170 / 561
2007	Parliamentary Elections (Sejm)	5,183,477	32.1%	166 / 460
2009	European Elections	2,017,607	27.4%	15 / 50
2010	Regional Assembly Elections	2,931,867	23.1%	141 / 561
2011	Parliamentary Elections (Sejm)	4,295,016	29.89%	157 / 460
2014	European Elections	3,276,436	31.8%	19 / 51
2014	Regional Assembly Elections	3,207,851	26.9%	171 / 555
2015	Parliamentary Elections (Sejm)	5,711,687	37.6%	235 / 460
2018	Regional Assembly Elections	5,267,667	34.27%	254 / 552

2019	European Elections	6,192,780	45.38%	27 / 52
2019	Parliamentary Elections (Sejm)	8,051,935	43.59%	235 / 460
2023	Parliamentary Elections (Sejm)	7,640,854	35.38%	194 / 460
2024	Regional Assembly Elections	4,941,092	34.27%	239 / 555
2024	European Elections	4,243,169	36.16%	20 / 53

Source: Author´s elaboration based on National Electoral Commission (2001,2002,2004,2006,2007,2009,2010,2011,2014,2015,2018,2019,2023,2024).

Figure 3. Evolution of PiS results in parliamentary, regional and European elections (2001–2024)



Source: National Electoral Commission (PKW), 2001–2023. Own elaboration.

Overall, the evolution of PiS from a marginal post-Solidarity formation into the dominant pole of the Polish party system reflects both systemic transformations and strategic adaptations. The collapse of AWS, the weakness of the left, and the volatility of the post-communist landscape provided PiS with opportunities to expand its appeal and reframe political competition around new cleavages. By 2015, the Polish party system had been reconfigured into a bipolar structure centred on PiS and PO, with PiS consolidating itself as the primary representative of conservative, nationalist, and populist currents. This consolidation not only secured

PiS's systemic centrality but also created the conditions for the subsequent ideological radicalisation that will be examined in the following chapter.

3.5 The rise and consolidation of Vox and PiS in different political systems: contracting opportunity structures and temporalities of radicalisation and institutionalisation

The emergence and consolidation of Vox and PiS within their respective party systems have been deeply shaped by the distinct configurations of national party competition and the nature of the political opportunities available to them. Although both Spain and Poland transitioned to democracy in the late twentieth century, the timing and trajectories of their democratic consolidation diverged significantly—Spain in 1978, and Poland in 1989. These temporal and structural divergences profoundly influenced the development of their party systems in terms of stability, fragmentation, and ideological polarisation.

In Spain, the democratic transition produced a relatively stable two-party system, dominated by PSOE and PP. This bipartisan model, underpinned by a consensus-oriented political culture and a centripetal logic of competition, long constrained the emergence of the radical right. The enduring legacy of the Franco dictatorship and the association of authoritarian nationalism with historical trauma further contributed to the exclusion of the far right from the democratic mainstream. Moreover, the PP effectively monopolised the entire spectrum of the Spanish right—from the centre-right to its more conservative fringes—leaving little electoral space for an alternative formation such as Vox.

However, it would be inaccurate to characterise Spain's party system today as strictly bipolar. Despite the continued electoral dominance of PSOE and PP—who together secured 64.74% of the vote in the most recent general elections (23 July 2023)—the political landscape has become increasingly fragmented. This fragmentation has been particularly acute on the left, though also evident on the right, and has been driven in part by the growing strength of nationalist and regionalist forces, which have introduced additional axes of contestation and now play a decisive role in government formation and parliamentary stability.

The fragmentation of the party system intensified due to several interrelated developments: the socio-economic effects of the 2008 financial crisis, which became particularly acute in Spain in the early 2010s; a series of high-profile

corruption scandals involving the major parties; and widespread public disaffection expressed through the 15-M movement. These dynamics facilitated the emergence of new political parties, such as Vox (founded in 2013) and Podemos (founded in 2014). The rise of Ciudadanos at the national level further contributed to the erosion of traditional partisan loyalties.

In this context of political disruption during the second half of the 2010s, the Catalan independence crisis marked a turning point. Following the 1 October 2017 referendum, the Parliament of Catalonia unilaterally declared independence, triggering a major constitutional confrontation. It was in this climate of territorial tension and political polarisation that Vox found a window of opportunity to enter the national stage. Capitalising on the emotive appeal of defending national unity and constitutional order, Vox presented itself as the voice of uncompromising Spanish nationalism, positioning itself as a bulwark against secessionism, multiculturalism, and perceived moral decline.

Yet, Vox's ascent cannot be explained by the Catalan crisis alone. The emergence of a strong feminist movement, which provoked a conservative backlash, and the internal crisis of leadership and credibility within the PP also facilitated its rise. These factors created fertile ground for Vox to position itself as a radical alternative capable of expressing grievances previously contained within mainstream conservatism.

By contrast, Poland’s party system followed a markedly different trajectory. After an initial period of post-communist volatility and severe fragmentation—particularly within the post-Solidarność right—it gradually underwent a process of bipolarisation from 2005 onwards. This led to the stabilisation of the party system around two dominant forces: PiS and the centrist or liberal-conservative PO, whose combined vote share increased from 62.6% in 2005 to 76.3% in 2023. Since then, centre-left formations have played only a marginal role in national politics.

Following the collapse of communism—and after a brief resurgence of relevance in the early 2000s—the Polish left suffered from widespread public distrust. From the mid-2000s onwards, the left became increasingly marginalised, unable to contest government power effectively and with minimal parliamentary presence. On several occasions, left-wing parties even struggled to surpass the electoral threshold. This marginalisation created a wide political space for conservative and

nationalist forces to dominate both the political and public agenda. This shift was further reinforced by growing social disillusionment resulting from economic transformation and the European integration process, which left certain sectors of the population—particularly in rural areas and among older citizens—feeling excluded or threatened by rapid change. These anxieties were effectively capitalised on by radical right-wing parties, which adopted populist, anti-elite discourses and portrayed themselves as defenders of traditional Polish values against perceived external threats. Electoral volatility has also facilitated the entry and consolidation of parties with more radical positions on the right of the conservative spectrum. Notable examples include the LPR in the early 2000s, the subsequent radicalisation of PiS, and more recently, the rise of the far-right Konfederacja, which has appealed to younger, nationalist-libertarian voters.

The temporal logic of party origins and consolidation within their respective political systems further distinguishes Vox from PiS. Vox was established in 2013 as a splinter from the PP, emerging from its most conservative faction, which had long existed within the broader structure of the party. Its foundation was driven by disaffection with what its founders perceived as the PP's increasing centrism and its inability to confront key challenges such as Catalan separatism, gender politics, and illegal immigration. From its inception—despite rejecting the label—Vox was widely classified within the PRR family, due to its ideological combination of authoritarianism, nativism, and populism. Its core discourse, shaped by Spanish nationalism, anti-feminism, and anti-immigration rhetoric, reflected a broader backlash against liberal progressive norms.

Nevertheless, the party remained without institutional representation for five years, until it secured 12 seats in the Andalusian regional elections in 2018. These elections occurred in a context marked by recent events in Catalonia—particularly the 2017 independence referendum and unilateral declaration of independence—as well as the no-confidence vote that brought Pedro Sánchez to power. The latter was prompted by the Gürtel case ruling, which exposed extensive corruption within the PP, further eroding trust in mainstream parties and opening a space for new challengers like Vox.

By contrast, PiS followed a gradual and endogenous process of radicalisation. It too originated from a political split—this time from the broader post-Solidarity camp—

but was initially framed as a centre-right, conservative party committed to the democratic consensus. Unlike Vox, PiS did not emerge as an outsider, but rather as the heir to the state-building project of the 1990s. It occupied the political space left by the collapse of the post-Solidarity right, including AWS, and consolidated itself as a mainstream conservative party. Early on, it positioned itself as a central pole in a new cleavage structure based on moral-cultural and sovereigntist antagonisms.

The opportunity structure for PiS was thus not created by an exogenous systemic rupture, but by long-term strategic positioning, ideological realignment, and the effective mobilisation of national trauma narratives—especially in the aftermath of the 2010 Smolensk air crash. PiS gradually transformed from a conservative party into a populist-authoritarian force through a series of critical junctures. Its first period in government (2005–2007) marked the beginning of its ideological shift, as it absorbed elements of the agendas of more radical parties such as the LPR and Samoobrona. During its years in opposition (2007–2015), PiS adopted increasingly national-populist rhetoric, intensifying its anti-establishment discourse as a response to its marginalisation by PO. The Smolensk tragedy further entrenched its role as the defender of national dignity and moral clarity against a perceived liberal and duplicitous elite.

This ideological trajectory culminated during PiS's eight uninterrupted years in power (2015–2023). The party's radicalisation was not the product of a singular external shock, but the outcome of a long-term process of strategic narrative construction centred on national victimhood, elite betrayal, and the restoration of Polish sovereignty. Unlike Vox, whose discourse crystallised rapidly in response to external crises, PiS incrementally built its ideological identity through programmatic continuity and embedded its project within the institutions of the state.

These divergent trajectories reflect two ideal-type models of PRR development: exogenous, crisis-induced radicalism (Vox) versus endogenous, elite-driven authoritarian consolidation (PiS). While Vox's radicalisation was front-loaded and externally driven, PiS's ideological shift was cumulative, disciplined, and oriented towards the progressive reshaping of Poland's democratic institutions.

The contrast extends to the mode and degree of institutional consolidation. Vox's growth has been electorally rapid but structurally fragile. It has entered several

regional governments as a junior partner to the PP but has limited experience in central governance. Its institutional anchoring is precarious, dependent on coalition politics, volatile electoral dynamics, and symbolic mobilisation around emotive issues. Since 2023, its support has begun to erode, and it has faced growing competition from more radical far-right actors such as SALF, leading to increased internal tensions and ideological hardening.

PiS, by contrast, has achieved deep institutional consolidation through majority rule. Between 2015 and 2023, it exercised full control of the executive and legislative branches, allowing it to implement a far-reaching programme of judicial overhaul, media politicisation, and educational reform. The party's consolidation was not merely electoral, but systemic: it used state institutions to entrench its ideological agenda and marginalise opposition. In this sense, PiS exemplifies a model of radical right governance in which populist authoritarianism becomes embedded within the machinery of the democratic state.

The comparison between Vox and PiS underscores the fact that PRR parties do not follow a uniform pattern of development. While they share a core ideological matrix—authoritarianism, nativism, and populism—their paths to power and ideological consolidation are shaped by the structural features of their political systems, their temporal alignment with crisis events, and their strategic capacity to exploit political opportunities.

Chapter 4. Vox: a traditional expression of the PRR in Spain

This chapter examines Vox as the Spanish representative of the PRR. Building on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, the first section analyses how the party articulates the core ideological features of the PRR—namely nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. The second section broadens the scope by considering additional programmatic dimensions commonly associated with PRR parties, including Vox's stance towards the European Union, its valorisation of rural identity and traditions, and its position on climate policy. These complementary elements contribute to the party's ideological coherence and resonance by mobilising cultural, economic, and territorial grievances, thereby enhancing its electoral appeal and consolidating its place within the broader PRR party family. The third section turns to Vox's economic agenda, assessing its neoliberal orientation through the lens of Kitschelt and McGann's (2005) "winning formulas" framework, and examining its recent attempts to broaden its support through a partial turn towards the working-class electorate.

4.1 Core features of the PRR in Vox

4.1.1 Spaniards first: nativism, immigration, and national identity

Like other PRR parties across Europe, Vox articulates a clear commitment to nativist ideology. Echoing the rhetoric of figures such as Marine Le Pen´s *priorité nationale* and Donald Trump's America First doctrine, Vox advocates for the prioritisation of native Spaniards in access to welfare, services, and opportunities. This position is encapsulated in slogans such as "*Spaniards first*" (Vox, 2019a) and reinforced by statements like: "*Spaniards come first. This is our home, and social services, aid, and security must be designed with Spain in mind*" and "*We want Spaniards to be at the front of the queue for healthcare and social housing*" (Vox, 2019).

Consistent with broader PRR trends, Vox´s nativism is primarily expressed through anti-immigration discourse (Zanotti & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022). At the core of this narrative lies the perceived threat that immigration poses to national identity, accompanied by the party's categorical rejection of multiculturalism. Vox adopts a rigid stance against irregular migration, arguing that immigration must be legal, economically motivated, and based on respect for national laws and customs (Vox,

2019a). The criminalisation of undocumented migrants is a recurrent theme, reinforcing the idea that only "orderly" and "law-abiding" immigration is acceptable (Fernández Suárez, 2021).

Moreover, Vox establishes a selective cultural hierarchy that favours Latin American immigrants over those from Islamic countries. As a party representative put it "an immigrant from a fraternal Latin American country, who shares our language, culture, and worldview, is not the same as an immigrant from an Islamic country. We do not want the 4% of Muslims currently in Spain—who may appear to some as a harmless or sympathetic minority—to become a problem" (Fernández-Vázquez & Ibarra, 2022). This reasoning reflects what has been termed ethnic Hispanism or Hispanist ethnicism—a form of cultural preferentialism grounded in perceived civilisational, religious, and historical affinities.

In its 2019 electoral programme, Vox asserted: "*Immigration will be managed with reference to the needs of the Spanish economy and the capacity of immigrants to integrate. Quotas of origin will be established, giving preference to nationalities that share a language and strong cultural and historical ties with Spain*" (Vox, 2019a) Even so, these cultural affinities are presented as necessary but insufficient conditions. Acceptable immigration must additionally satisfy three criteria: it must be legal; it must serve Spain's national interests; and it must involve individuals willing to contribute actively to the national project. As stated during a 2020 address in the Senate: "*We need immigration that enters Spain in an orderly and legal fashion—not by forcing its way through the gates*" (Senado, 2020).

Moreover, immigrants must be economically productive and socially responsible. Vox has repeatedly declared: "*We want cities where those who arrive legally to work—such as our brothers from the Hispanic world—are welcomed, as they come to integrate, to work, and to fulfil all legal obligations*" (Vox, 2018a), and "*There is nothing wrong with defending the idea that those who come with the intention of working, striving, and contributing to our country should also find a place here*" (Vox, 2018b).

In contrast, the party´s reactive nativism is centred on a resolute rejection of Muslim immigration, constructed through rejection, perceived threat, fear, and, ultimately, a national phobia towards everything that represents Islam. Within Vox's discourse, an Islamophobic imaginary is constructed around Islam and the Muslim

community, fuelled by a vision of national identity that establishes an insurmountable division between "*what is ours*" (Christian, European, and Western) and "*the other*" (Islam and its adherents). This position is exemplified in the following excerpt: "*Would anyone accept that the person they kindly welcomed and invited into their home should decide (...) that pork will no longer be eaten in that home (...) or that from now on, their wife will wear a veil? Or that Sundays are no longer for going to mass? Or that eating with one's hands is normal (...) We who live in this home have freely decided how things are done. So how can you come from outside and try to impose your way of life on us*?" (Vox, 2021a).

The criminalisation of foreign unaccompanied minors (MENAs[1]) is another element of the migration discourse of Vox. The party claims that 'MENAs' appropriate public resources not meant for them, to the detriment of the local population—who, in turn, have limited access to social protection, pointing them as a social and urban security problem (Cheddadi,2020).

This discourse draws upon a symbolic nationalism rooted in the memory of the Christian Reconquista. It portrays Islam not merely as a foreign religion but as a historical adversary of the Spanish nation. Through references to past struggles and a glorified vision of Spain's formation, Vox reasserts a narrative of national identity forged through resistance to Islamic influence (El Haddad, 2024).

Beyond its anti-immigration rhetoric, Vox's nativism is embedded in a broader ideological project. The party consistently champions Spanish national identity, territorial unity, and the revalorisation of "being Spanish". Its discourse appeals to patriotic pride, national sentiment, and an assertive form of unitary nationalism (Rama, Zanotti et al., 2021). Vox does not merely present itself as a political party, but as a political instrument in service of the Spanish Nation. This stance is clearly reflected in the party's manifestos and public addresses, where Spanish nationalism functions as the core ideological foundation (Ferreira, 2019).

The party advocates for a mononational, centralised state, explicitly rejecting the plurinational model enshrined in Spain's constitutional framework. Peripheral

[1] These are foreigners under eighteen years of age, arrived in Spanish territory without being accompa nied by any adult responsible for them, either legally or in accordance with custom, appreciating the risk of lack of protection of the minor, while said responsible adult has not effectively taken care of the minor, as well as any foreign minor, who is ever in that situation in Spain (Real Decreto 557/2011).

nationalisms—especially Catalan and Basque—are depicted as existential threats to state sovereignty. In response, Vox proposes radical constitutional reforms. Its 2019 electoral manifesto opens with a call to suspend Catalan autonomy "*until the unmitigated defeat of the participants in the coup and the purification of civil and criminal responsibilities*" (Vox, 2018). It also proposes the banning of political parties and organisations that seek the dissolution of national unity and sovereignty.

In reference to the crisis surrounding the Catalan conflict in 2019, Vox leader Santiago Abascal declared: "*The first thing we would do is promote the suspension of autonomy in Catalonia in order to take control of TV3, the Mossos d'Esquadra, and, of course, the education system. Secondly, we would propose the outlawing of the separatist parties, which in Catalonia have become criminal organisations serving a coup d'état. Thirdly, we would ensure that those committing the clear offence of rebellion—such as Mr Torra, who is invoking the Slovenian Path, which is a violent route, and who is abandoning his responsibilities while Barcelona is in flames to go and block roads—be arrested, handcuffed, and brought before the courts with a charge of rebellion filed by the State Attorney's Office. That is what needs to be done, and that is what acting proportionately in response to what is happening in Barcelona looks like*" (Escolar, 2019).

Vox's flagship slogan, "*Living Spain*", defends the unity of the country against all those who allegedly seek to undermine it, presenting the party as the true representative of "real Spain" against its supposed enemies (Rama et al., 2021). This dualistic narrative, particularly targeting the political left as well as pro-independence movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country, strongly echoes the historical framing of the 1936 general elections. During that period, the dichotomy between "real Spain" and "anti-Spain" emerged as a prelude to the Civil War and was later employed by the Francoist camp to designate those they labelled "enemies of the homeland" (i.e., Republicans).

This rhetoric was powerfully articulated by Abascal during a rally in 2018 in Madrid:

"*The living Spain has awakened, thank God […] Living Spain has conquered Vistalegre […] We want to overflow the ballot boxes when Spain is given back the voice that has been taken from it […]. Some are going to say that the far right is coming, while the people who betrayed you, who let the left govern, who did not*

remove a single one of the laws of the left, who did not fight for Spain in Catalonia, now tell you that you are to blame for the rise of the left and separatism." (Vox, 2018b).

This rhetorical framing is accompanied by a legislative agenda to protect national unity. Vox calls for greater legal protection of national symbols such as the flag, the anthem, and the crown, and proposes harsher penalties for acts of disrespect towards them (Vox, 2018). Indeed, Abascal claimed "*I'm Spanish. Neither monarchical nor republican (...) Spain, its sovereignty and its unity are above monarchy, the Constitution and democracy*", Likewise, the defence of the Spanish language is central to its cultural programme. Vox demands that Spanish be the primary language of instruction across all autonomous communities, relegating co-official languages (Catalan, Galician, Basque) to optional status. The party asserts that "Spanish should be a compulsory vehicle language, and co-official languages should be optional", adding that "parents should have the right to choose their children's language in school" (Rama, Zanotti et al., 2021). This is framed as a constitutional imperative:

"*We need to comply with the constitutional mandate that all Spaniards have the right to use the Spanish language, and the duty to know it*" (Vox, 2021a).

Underlying this nationalist discourse is an idealised and mythologised conception of Spanish history. Vox consistently invokes national milestones and heroic episodes from Spain's past as sources of collective pride and cultural identity (Rodríguez, 2021). This historical narrative does not merely serve commemorative purposes; it seeks to restore a glorified vision of Spain's legacy, aligning with broader trends in the European PRR. Vox's construction of "*Spanishness*" is thus infused with symbolic references to a resurrected past, framed as a moral imperative to reclaim the nation's former grandeur. This romanticised vision is also sympathetic to the legacy of the Franco regime, with frequent allusions to a "better" and more "glorious" era in Spain's history. While Vox does not explicitly reject the democratic system, it draws upon several ideological elements of Francoism—particularly its defence of traditional moral values and exaltation of a unified, Catholic, and centralised nation (Rama et al., 2021).

4.1.1.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2019-2024)

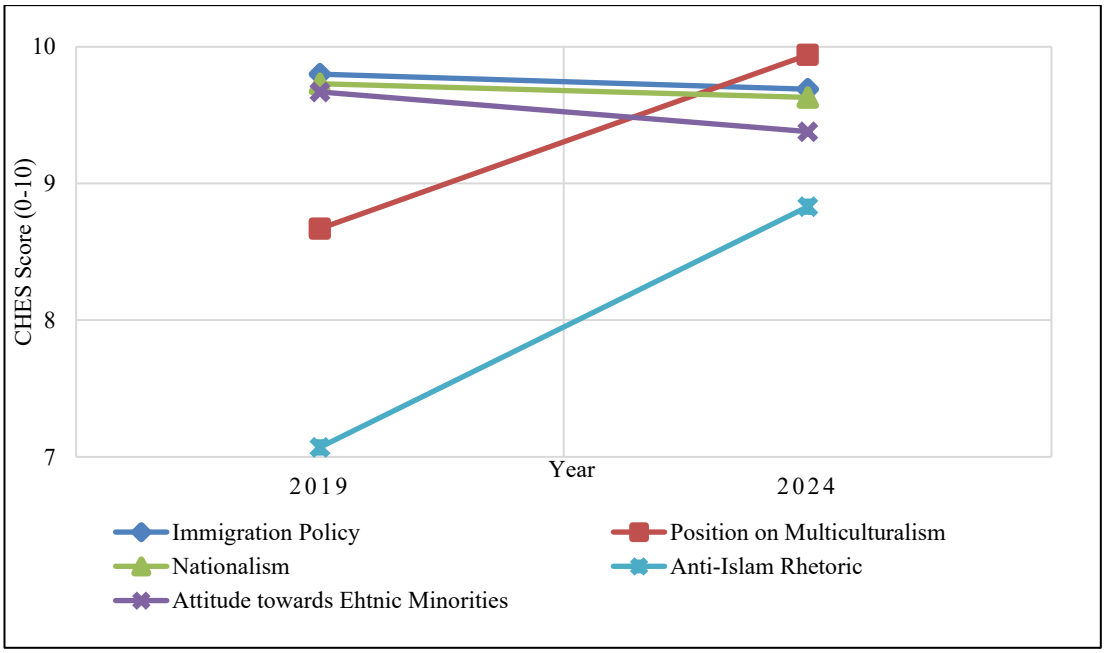
Table 8. Nativism indicators for Vox

Year	Immigration Policy (position)	Immigration Salience	Multiculturalism (position)	Multiculturalism salience	Nationalism (position)	Attitude towards Ethnic Minorities	Anti-Islam Rhetoric (position)
2019	9.80	9.54	8.67	8.79	9.73	9.67	7.07
2024	9.69	9.54	9.94	8.80	9.63	9.38	8.83

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, following CHES coding. Higher values indicate more exclusionary or nativist positions (e.g., stricter immigration policy, greater salience of immigration, stronger opposition to multiculturalism, more nationalist orientations, negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and more Islamophobic positions.

Figure 4.Evolution of nativism indicators in Vox (2019-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

To empirically capture Vox's nativist orientation, Table 8 and Figure 4 present selected indicators from the CHES for 2019 and 2024 (Jolly et al., 2022, Rovny et

al.,2024). The data provide robust empirical evidence of the persistence and intensification of nativist ideology in the party's platform. Across all measured dimensions—including immigration policy, the salience of immigration and multiculturalism, nationalism, attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and anti-Islam rhetoric—Vox scores at the upper end of the 0–10 scale. These values underscore the centrality of nativism in Vox's ideology and align the party with broader PRR patterns across Europe.

Vox's position on immigration policy continues to be firmly restrictive. Although there is a slight decline in the strictness of its stance (from 9.80 in 2019 to 9.69 in 2024), the salience of immigration within its political agenda remains constant at a high level (9.54). This continued prioritisation reflects the party's enduring emphasis on immigration as a key issue, often framed in terms of the need for "orderly" and "productive" migration. Such framing reinforces Vox's belief that immigration should be tightly controlled and culturally assimilable.

Of particular note is the sharp radicalisation of Vox's stance on multiculturalism. While the salience of this issue has remained largely unchanged (8.79 in 2019 and 8.80 in 2024), the party's opposition to multiculturalism has increased significantly, rising from 8.67 to 9.94. This shift reflects a deeper and more explicit rejection of cultural pluralism and an intensified commitment to a monocultural nationalist vision. The data point to a growing rigidity in Vox's position, portraying multiculturalism as fundamentally incompatible with national unity and cohesion.

Nationalism continues to be a cornerstone of Vox's ideological framework. Although the nationalism score has slightly decreased (from 9.73 to 9.63), it remains consistently high, highlighting the enduring relevance of sovereignty, unity, and national identity in the party's discourse. A similar pattern is evident in attitudes towards ethnic minorities, which show a modest decline from 9.67 to 9.38. However, this marginal change does not indicate any meaningful softening of the party's exclusionary worldview. Rather, it suggests the persistence of an ideological stance in which the primacy of the "native" Spaniard is actively promoted and defended.

The most pronounced transformation between 2019 and 2024 is observed in anti-Islam rhetoric, which rises markedly from 7.07 to 8.83. This notable increase signals an expanding reliance on Islamophobic narratives in Vox's discourse. The

party increasingly frames Islam as a civilisational threat, depicting Muslim communities as culturally incompatible with Spanish values. This rhetoric reinforces Vox's image as a defender of a homogeneous national identity and demonstrates the growing role of Islamophobic imaginaries as a means to justify fortifying national and cultural boundaries.

Taken together, the CHES data clearly indicate that Vox has not only maintained a high-intensity nativist discourse but has also, in several key areas—particularly with regard to multiculturalism and Islam—further radicalised its positions. These developments confirm the party's deepening alignment with core European PRR features.

4.1.2 Authoritarianism and the politics of order: security, morality and social conservatism

Authoritarianism constitutes a central pillar of Vox´s ideological and programmatic framework. This orientation is primarily articulated through an ultra-restrictive immigration policy, designed to reinforce a societal order based on security, punishment, legality, and authority. The party consistently advocates a "firm hand" to preserve the safety of Spanish citizens and to confront those it deems enemies of the nation—most notably, irregular immigrants.

This punitive logic is reflected in Vox´s policy agenda, which advocates for the strict enforcement of criminal sentences and the introduction of harsher penalties. Proposals include increased sentences for crimes such as human trafficking and the exploitation of minors, as well as reforms to the Penal Code to impose more severe penalties for offences against Spain's historical and artistic heritage. Aligned with this approach, the party also supports the introduction of life imprisonment without the possibility of review for terrorists and other serious offenders, declaring: "*We demand life imprisonment without any form of review*" (Vox, 2018).

Vox also defends the right to use force in defence of one's home. As stated in its programme: "*Living Spain wants to be able to defend its home when a violent burglar breaks in, and wants the right, if the means are available, to defend life and property inside the home*" (Vox, 2018). This, according to the party, should be recognised as a legitimate act of self-defence. In a similar vein, Vox adopts a zero-tolerance approach to illegal squatting, calling for the immediate expulsion of squatters via police intervention (Vox, 2018).

The party ´s authoritarian orientation is especially pronounced in its discourse on immigration. During a rally for the 2024 European Parliament elections, the candidate Jorge Buxadé stated: "*We are in a state of permanent emergency due to illegal immigration. A hardline policy must be applied to those who, instead of integrating, undermine the well-being of society*." (Vox, 2024). Accordingly, Vox demands the expedited processing and immediate expulsion of all irregular migrants, alongside the prohibition of any mechanisms for legalisation or access to public services.

In parallel, the party calls for the reinforcement of border security, including military deployment on the borders of Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands, and an expanded police presence to prevent the emergence of what it calls "ghettos" where Islamic law is imposed, and the rule of law disappears (Vox España, 2021). Vox also proposes cutting all public funding to NGOs and civil society organisations that, in its narrative, "facilitate" irregular immigration or collaborate with trafficking networks. To counter Islamic fundamentalism, it has called for the immediate closure of radical mosques and an end to financial support for Islamist organisations from third countries and the EU, coupled with greater scrutiny of EU budget allocations.

The unifying signifier underpinning this agenda is security. Vox repeatedly invokes security to legitimise its proposals: "*Vox defends families' security, peaceful coexistence, and thus the expulsion of illegal immigrants*" (Vox, 2018); "*high levels of immigration… lead to insecurity and fear*" (Vox, 2019a); "*secure borders mean secure neighbourhoods*". Particularly emblematic in this narrative are the so-called *menas* (unaccompanied foreign minors), who Vox presents as proof of the alleged link between immigration, criminality, and social disorder—a situation it attributes to the permissiveness of "progressive elites" (Cheddadi, 2020).

In addition to its securitarian agenda, Vox's authoritarianism also extends into the sociocultural realm, where it seeks to impose a moral order rooted in traditional Catholic values. Central to this vision is the promotion of the so-called "*natural family*," and the prohibition of same-sex marriage, abortion, and euthanasia. These positions are framed as part of a broader moral crusade to defend life "*from conception to natural death*" (Vox, 2018), arguing that both abortion and euthanasia undermine the right to life and contribute to a "*culture of death*" (Brunet, 2021).

Vox elevates motherhood and the traditional biological family as essential pillars of society and opposes any policy perceived to threaten these values. Notably, the party supports removing abortion from the public healthcare system and endorses the controversial "*parental veto*," which would allow parents to prevent their children from participating in educational activities addressing gender and sexual diversity (Brunet, 2021).

These proposals are embedded in wider effort to reassert a moral order grounded in conservative religious values. While Vox has sought to mobilise support around the defence and revitalisation of traditional Catholicism, it has failed to significantly capture the Catholic vote, which continues to favour mainstream parties such as the PP and PSOE. In a context of growing secularisation, Catholic references are peripheral in party manifestos, although the religion is rhetorically framed as a traditional worldview abandoned by the country's elites yet still cherished by the "*culturally left behind*." As Vox proclaims: "[*The elites] want us to renounce our traditions, our religion, while they embrace others*" (Vox, 2020a); "*Believers are today oppressed by this illegitimate government, and we are their only hope*" (Vox, 2018).

Nonetheless, Vox maintains an ambiguous relationship with the Catholic Church. While Pope Francis and many sectors of the Spanish clergy have publicly criticised the party's positions—particularly regarding immigration and social justice—Vox has tended to align itself with ultraconservative groups such as Opus Dei and El Yunque, both of which challenge the current direction of the Vatican (Palós, 2025).

Closely linked to this moral conservatism is Vox's explicitly anti-feminist positioning, which constitutes another central strand of its authoritarian ideological configuration. The party denies the existence of gender as a social construct and vilifies what it terms '*gender ideology*," a central emblem of its broader anti-feminist strategy. This discourse seeks to imbue the term with negative connotations and to delegitimise any policy or legal framework in which the concept of gender appears. According to Vox, feminist and equality policies are not tools for addressing structural inequalities but ideological impositions that undermine the natural social order. The party positions itself as a defender of this "*natural order*" against what it depicts as a radical feminism that threatens the traditional family (Vox, 2020b).

This framing extends to feminist organisations, portrayed as ideological "lobbies" and parasitic interest groups. A notable illustration is Vox's manifesto for International Women's Day, *Do Not Speak in My Name*, in which the party denounced 8 March as an invention of the radical left designed to victimise women and sow division between men and women. It also accuses feminist movements of collectivising working women and destabilising family cohesion (La Vanguardia, 2021).

These ideological positions are translated into programmatic demands. Vox advocates repealing the Gender-Based Violence Act and its replacement with a law on intrafamily violence; the defunding of "*radical feminist organisations*," described as "*ideological chiringuitos*" that squander public resources; the prosecution of false accusations in cases of domestic violence; and the creation of a Ministry of the Family. The party also proposes a new Organic Law for the Protection of the Natural Family, which it defines as a pre-political institution deserving of constitutional protection (Vox, 2023).

Closely tied to these positions are Vox's anti-LGBTQ+ stances, which occupy a prominent place in its political platform. Through the deployment of anti-gender rhetoric, the party promotes a reactionary conception of national identity based on traditionalist and heteronormative values. Vox has pursued legislative efforts aimed at dismantling Spain's progressive framework on LGBTQ+ rights—most notably, same-sex marriage (legal since 2005) and gender self-determination. In 2023, the party proposed repealing the *Ley Trans*, which permits individuals to change their legal gender without medical certification. Vox framed the proposal as necessary for "*child protection,*" claiming that gender-affirming healthcare poses "*irreversible harm*" to minors, despite broad scientific consensus affirming its safety and importance. Party leaders frequently portray LGBTQ+ activism as a manifestation of "*gender ideology*" and "*cultural imperialism*" imposed by globalist elites. Within this framework, gender and sexual diversity are constructed as external threats to the nation's moral and cultural fabric, reinforcing Vox's broader vision of national regeneration through the rejection of progressive and cosmopolitan values (Vox, 2023).

4.1.2.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2019-2024)

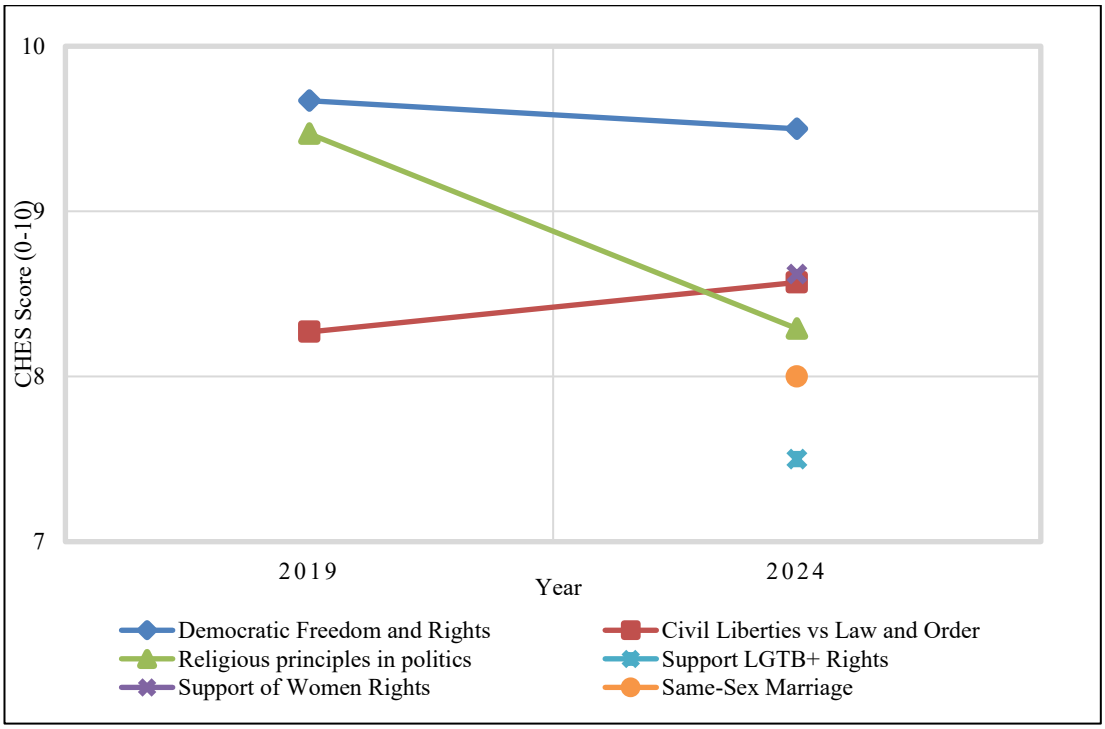
Table 9. Authoritarianism indicators for Vox

Year	Democratic freedom and rights (position)	Civil Liberties vs Law and order (salience)	Civil Liberties vs Law and Order (position)	Religious principles in politics (position)	Support for Women Rights	Support for LGBT+ Rights	Same-sex marriage (position)
2019	9.67	8.27	9.80	9.47	n/a	n/a	n/a
2024	9.50	8.57	9.86	8.29	8.62	7.5	8

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, following CHES coding. Higher values indicate stronger authoritarian or traditionalist positions: greater restrictions on democratic freedoms and rights, stronger emphasis on law-and-order over civil liberties, greater influence of religion in politics, and more conservative views on women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and same-sex marriage. Where data are unavailable, values are reported as n/a.

Figure 5. Evolution of authoritarianism indicators for Vox (2019-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 9 and Figure 5 present longitudinal data on indicators of authoritarianism within Vox, drawing on expert assessments from the CHES for the years 2019 and 2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al.,2024). The data provide compelling empirical evidence for the persistence and deepening of authoritarian elements in the party's platform. Vox consistently scores at the upper end of the 0–10 scale across dimensions such as democratic freedoms, civil liberties, religious conservatism, and, more recently, gender and sexual rights—underscoring the centrality of authoritarianism in its political orientation.

Of particular note is the party's stance on democratic freedoms and rights, which remains virtually unchanged between 2019 (9.67) and 2024 (9.50). This consistency reflects a sustained rejection of liberal democratic norms in favour of a hierarchical and securitised conception of political order.

The civil liberties vs law and order dimension further substantiates this tendency. Although the salience of this issue increases modestly from 8.27 to 8.57, Vox's position on the scale intensifies slightly from 9.80 to 9.86. This shift reflects an increasing emphasis on punitive measures and coercive state mechanisms over the protection of individual rights—consistent with the party's broader securitarian discourse on sovereignty, public order, and internal cohesion.

A related indicator is the invocation of religious principles in politics, which, while decreasing from 9.47 in 2019 to 8.29 in 2024, continues to reflect a significant role for religion in Vox's political agenda. The party continues to strongly oppose abortion, euthanasia, comprehensive sexuality education, and feminist or gender-based equality policies. Its advocacy for "traditional family values" and the presence of religious content in public institutions underscores the enduring influence of conservative Catholic values in its programme.

The inclusion of additional variables in the 2024 CHES dataset enables a more nuanced evaluation of Vox's authoritarian-conservative trajectory. For instance, its score of 8.62 on support for women's rights suggests a selective and ideologically constrained interpretation of gender equality, rooted in traditional gender roles and marked by resistance to feminist legislative frameworks. This is exemplified by the party's proposal to replace gender-based violence laws with a generalised law on "intrafamilial violence", thus obscuring the structural and gendered nature of such violence.

In relation to LGBTQ+ rights, Vox registers a score of 7.50, indicative of sustained ideological resistance to the progressive legal reforms enacted in Spain since the early 2000s. This is further reinforced by its position on same-sex marriage (score: 8.00), reflecting its advocacy for a model of civil union restricted to heterosexual couples and its opposition to legal parity for LGBTQ+ families. Most notably, the party's 2023 proposal to repeal the *Ley Trans*—a law allowing legal gender self-identification without medical certification—exemplifies its broader effort to dismantle institutional safeguards.

In sum, the CHES data illustrate not only the consolidation of authoritarian ideological elements within Vox but also the extension of its conservative programme into the domains of civil rights and social policy. This intensification reflects the party's broader ambition to reconfigure Spanish society according to a culturally homogeneous, hierarchically ordered, and morally traditionalist conception of the nation—aligning it ideologically with other parties of the PRR across Europe.

4.1.3 Nation before people: strategic populism

Populism is not a central element of Vox's ideology in the same way as other defining features; nonetheless, over time, it has gained increasing prominence within the party's discourse, particularly in a context marked by political tension and polarisation, where populist rhetoric has served as a strategic tool to further intensify political divides, distinguish Vox from other parties in the eyes of the electorate, and garner broader social support.

From its inception, Vox has positioned itself as a new political force standing in opposition to entrenched power structures and economic and political elites (Rodríguez-Teruel,2022). However, the party rarely appeals directly to the working classes or articulates demands for greater popular sovereignty, nor does it consistently critique a visibly corrupt elite. On certain occasions, Vox has attempted to adopt an implicitly populist discourse—for example, blaming "*the politicians*" for having "*accepted the massive Islamic invasion*" —and has similarly employed anti-globalist rhetoric, such as voicing opposition to the "*globalist consensus*" or "*European elites*," at times suggesting a dichotomy between the European Union and the people: "*at Vox, we defend our freedom to prioritise the needs of Europe*

and the Spanish people over the interests of oligarchies, political bosses, lobbies or supranational organisations" (Vox, 2018).

Despite these occasional uses of populist language, such elements remained subordinated to Vox's overarching nationalist ideology, grounded in symbols such as the Spanish language, Catholic tradition, territorial integrity, and the traditional family model. Rather than structuring its discourse around the conventional vertical axis of *'people versus elite'*, Vox constructs a national identity based on a horizontal division between cultural 'insiders' and 'outsiders.

Vox's vision of the national community encompasses a broad range of social groups, including youth, the elderly, the middle class, small business owners, and women. This is reflected in party statements: "*so that young people can reclaim their future, and not be forced to abandon the homeland* " (Abascal, 2018); "*we express our love for our women, for Spanish women, for any woman living in Spain, and for their safety*"; "*because patriots are the most effective and the most appropriate to conserve a country's natural environment*" (Vox España, 2021); and "*those suffering are the Spaniards living in social emergency—the youth condemned to unemployment or exile from our homeland, the workers besieged by taxes, living on miserable wages and unable to start a family, the elderly and the dependent who do not receive social assistance*" (Abascal, 2018). Despite this apparent inclusivity, the underlying narrative remains ideologically rigid, constructing the nation as a homogeneous, essentialist, and immutable entity.

Vox's discourse occasionally alludes, either implicitly or explicitly, to notions such as "ordinary people" , "the Spain that gets up early", or invokes common sense "because the basics will always be common sense, effort, merit, honour, courage, charity, discipline, and respect for authority" , or refers broadly to "the people" ("*we want power to protect the Spanish people from their enemies, from those who seek to divide our homelan*d"). However, there is no coherent discursive construction of a popular subject, because the central construct is that of the Spanish nation (Baquero & González, 2021).

From 2020 onwards, as Vox consolidated its parliamentary presence (with 52 seats and 15% of the vote), it began to pursue electoral inroads into popular and working-class sectors, where its support remained limited and it had yet to establish itself as a significant force. The party initiated targeted appeals to the working class, notably

through social media campaigns and the creation of the trade union *Solidaridad*, named in homage to Lech Wałęsa's original organisation. According to Vox's leader, Santiago Abascal, the union's mission is to "*protect workers, their families, our neighbourhoods, and our industry from ideological, subsidised and corrupt trade unions that have betrayed them and are in the hands of oligarchies that serve only power and those who provide them with funding*" (Vox, 2020c).

Yet this initiative clearly reflects the ethnic nationalist and anti-immigration ideology that underpins Vox´s broader political discourse. Statements from party leaders referring to a union exclusively for "Spanish workers," as does the organisation´s full name: *Union for the Defence of Solidarity with the Workers of Spain*. This framing promotes a form of welfare chauvinism, prioritising the rights and protections of native-born citizens over those of foreign workers, and reinforces a national preference that aligns with the party's exclusionary vision of the national community

During the most recent legislative period, amid heightened polarisation and institutional mistrust, Vox's strategic use of populism intensified. Its leader, Santiago Abascal has consistently employed both populist and national-populist rhetoric to foster conflict, often targeting the President of the Government, Pedro Sánchez, as the personification of all Spain's ills. Sánchez, along with the governing coalition parties—namely, PSOE and Unidas Podemos (later Sumar)—is portrayed by Vox as a threat to individual liberties and national integrity, allegedly having attained power through deception and manipulation of the electorate. In addition, Vox directs its hostility, albeit to a lesser extent, towards the nationalist and separatist parties that support the government, labelling them as "enemies of Spain." These attacks are predominantly aimed at delegitimising the government and its policies. As Abascal declared before the Spanish Parliament: *"They are destroying Spain, they are destroying our coexistence, they have made pacts with the enemies of Spain. You have trampled on the rights and freedoms of Spaniards"* (Congreso de los Diputados, 2021).

Within this discursive framework, Vox presents itself as the sole defender of fundamental principles linked to national identity and unity, democratic order, traditional values, and economic salvation. In contrast, the government and its constituent parties are portrayed as the principal antagonists of these values. As

stated by Vox: *"On one side is the Government of Spain, which brings ruin, poverty, and a lack of freedoms to Spaniards; and on the other, VOX, which defends liberty and prosperity"* (Congreso de los Diputados, 2020). The party constructs an apocalyptic narrative in which Spain is depicted as teetering on the brink of chaos and socio-political disintegration, with Vox emerging as the sole hope for the preservation of the nation and its identity—summed up in the binary slogan: *"Either us or chaos."* This binary framing exemplifies the Manichaean logic typical of radical right populism, where national salvation is exclusively channelled through the party itself.

Vox's communicative strategy prioritises the nation as the primary political subject, thereby subordinating 'the people' to a pre-political, culturally defined national identity. Scholars have variously described this approach as nationalist (Ferreira, 2019) or national populist (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Alcoceba, et.al, 2023).

4.1.3.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2019-2024)

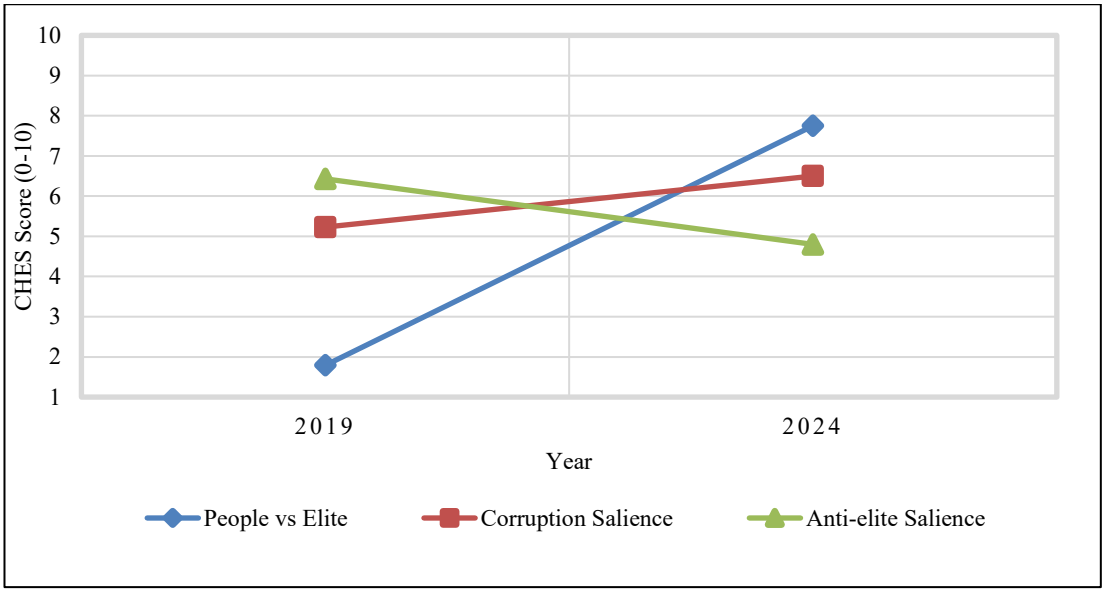
Table 10.Populism indicators for Vox (2019-2024)

Year	People vs Elite (position)	Corruption Salience	Anti-elite Salience
2019	1.79	5.23	6.43
2024	7.75	6.50	4.80

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, following CHES coding. Higher values indicate a stronger "people versus elite" stance and greater salience of corruption and anti-elite rhetoric.

Figure 6.Evolution of populism Indicators for Vox (2014-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 10 and Figure 6 present longitudinal data on indicators of populism within Vox, based on expert assessments from the CHES for the years 2019 and 2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al., 2024). Data provide compelling empirical evidence of the persistence—and, in some areas, intensification—of populist ideological components within the party's platform. Vox consistently records scores at the upper end of the 0–10 scale across a range of dimensions—people vs elite, corruption salience and anti-elite Salience- —underscoring the growing salience of populist elements in the party's strategic discourse.

Between 2019 and 2024, Vox experienced a marked radicalisation in its populist orientation, most clearly evidenced by the dramatic rise in its *people vs elite* score, from 1.79 to 7.75. This shift reflects the party's increasing reliance on a core populist narrative that frames politics as a moral struggle between a virtuous, homogeneous people and a corrupt, self-serving elite. This rhetorical escalation reflects a broader context marked by polarisation, institutional mistrust, and waning confidence in mainstream parties. Within this framework, Vox positions itself as the sole guardian of Spain's foundational values—national unity, cultural heritage, and economic sovereignty—purportedly threatened by an entrenched political class.

The increasing salience of corruption in Vox's discourse is similarly significant. The party's score on this dimension rose from 5.23 in 2019 to 6.50 in 2024,

indicating that anti-corruption rhetoric has become more prominent in its political messaging. In particular, Vox has intensified its critique of the coalition government led by Pedro Sánchez, portraying it as emblematic of systemic institutional decay. The party frequently links allegations of corruption to broader claims of national decline, using them to justify radical institutional reforms—including demands for Sánchez's resignation and the dissolution of parliament. This narrative reinforces the idea that Spain's political system is fundamentally compromised and no longer capable of self-correction.

By contrast, the decline in *anti-elite salience*—from 6.43 in 2019 to 4.80 in 2024—suggests a shift in emphasis away from generalised anti-elitism. Rather than denouncing the elite as a unified and undifferentiated category, Vox increasingly directs its critique toward specific actors and institutions that it associates with progressive agendas, multiculturalism, and supranational governance. This discursive recalibration highlights the party's strategic adaptation: populism is increasingly instrumentalised not as an end in itself, but as a vehicle to reinforce its nativist and authoritarian ideological commitments. In this regard, the declining anti-elite score may not indicate a weakening of populist sentiment but rather a refinement of its ideological targets.

In conclusion, the CHES data demonstrate the entrenchment of populist elements within Vox's ideological framework—most notably through the marked increase in its people-versus-elite narrative. However, rather than constituting a coherent or foundational populist project, these themes are strategically mobilised and adapted to reinforce the party's core ideological pillars: nativism, moral traditionalism, and authoritarian order. Populism, in this context, functions less as an autonomous discourse than as a flexible instrument embedded within the broader political repertoire of PRR.

4.2 Beyond the core: additional ideological pillars

Although nativism, authoritarianism, and populism are widely recognised as the defining features of Vox, several additional ideological elements are crucial for understanding the party's political identity and its broader appeal. Among these, the construction of transnational elites as adversaries, a pronounced rejection of environmental policy, and a valorisation of rural life occupy a central place in the party's discourse. Far from being peripheral or merely tactical, these themes are deeply embedded in Vox's project of cultural nationalism and constitute key pillars of its strategy for ideological differentiation within the Spanish party system.

As a nationalist populist party, Vox places particular emphasis on constructing a dichotomy between the Spanish nation and supranational or cosmopolitan elites. In this narrative, international elites are portrayed as politically powerful yet detached from ordinary citizens, acting against the national interest and eroding Spain's sovereignty. The European Union is frequently identified as one of the party's primary adversaries. Despite the relatively low levels of Euroscepticism among the Spanish electorate—and its historical association with sectors of the left (Stokes, 2016)—Vox systematically portrays the EU as a hostile, interventionist, and ideologically aligned institution. Jean-Claude Juncker, former President of the European Commission, has been described by Vox as a "*socialist bureaucrat who meddles with national sovereignties*" (Sánchez Dragó, 2019), while Ursula von der Leyen is depicted as a political ally of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, reinforcing the image of the EU as an ideological instrument of progressive globalism (COPE, 2024). Vox leader Santiago Abascal has gone so far as to describe the EU as an "oligarchy" (El Periódico, 2020), accusing its representatives of imposing regulations that undermine Spanish identity and harm working- and middle-class citizens.

This anti-elite narrative is extended beyond the European context to encompass other transnational actors perceived as vectors of progressive ideology. For example, in the aftermath of the 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol, Abascal defended Donald Trump and denounced what he called the "*American and European progressive mafia*", accusing them of orchestrating a "*violent spring*" akin to the Arab Spring, which he blamed for war, instability, and mass migration (El Plural, 2020). These references illustrate how Vox's discourse merges

nationalism with a broader critique of global liberalism, whereby institutions, agreements, and transnational movements are framed as existential threats to Spanish sovereignty, tradition, and social cohesion. Unlike classical populist narratives that primarily target national elites, Vox's discourse increasingly centres on transnational institutions as emblematic of an ideological project undermining national sovereignty.

This antagonism towards transnational elites finds further expression in Vox´s approach to environmental governance, where the party portrays climate initiatives as ideological impositions by globalist bureaucracies. Vox explicitly rejects the Paris Agreement and vocally opposes EU-led environmental initiatives such as the European Green Deal. The party characterises such measures as manifestations of "*climate fanaticism*" which, in its view, place environmental objectives above Spain's economic sovereignty and national priorities. For example, Vox has described the EU's proposed ban on the sale of combustion-engine vehicles from 2035 as "*inspired by climate fanaticism*" and "*completely premature*" given Spain's socioeconomic realities (López, 2024). Party leaders argue that these policies are ideologically motivated and harmful to key sectors such as agriculture and industry. In this context, MP Ricardo Chamorro defended the party's opposition to the European Green Deal by declaring that "*the voice of farmers must take precedence over the voice of science*." He further justified his vote against environmental legislation on the grounds that such policies are "*another of the Agenda 2030 laws that make life impossible for rural workers*" (Vox, 2025a).

Vox's climate scepticism extends to a rejection of the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change. Its representatives have variously downplayed global warming or denied its human origins, often describing climate policies as alarmist or fanatical. However, the party's stance has undergone a degree of evolution since its founding. In its early years, Vox largely ignored environmental issues and adopted an overtly denialist tone. Tellingly, its 2018 electoral programme did not mention the term "*climate change*" even once (Elorza, Bertelli and Vrba, 2023). Following its institutional entry, however, Vox's rhetoric shifted. The party began acknowledging the reality of global warming while downplaying its severity and deflecting responsibility onto other nations, particularly China. This repositioning enabled Vox to articulate a form of nationalist climate discourse in

which Spain is absolved of blame and international actors are cast as the true culprits. Concurrently, the party hardened its opposition to domestic climate policies, portraying them as detrimental to the economy and positioning itself as a defender of the supposed "*losers*" of the green transition, such as farmers, hauliers, and industrial workers. Accordingly, Vox has proposed repealing Spain's climate change law on the grounds that it harms the national economy; it has opposed bans on combustion engines and championed traditional energy autonomy; and it advocates for the continued exploitation of fossil fuels alongside a rollback of international climate commitments. At the same time, it supports nuclear energy as a clean and stable energy source.

Vox's symbolic revalorisation of the rural world—closely linked to its environmental discourse—plays a strategic role in its national-conservative narrative. Rural Spain is portrayed not merely as the geographical heartland of the nation but as the moral and cultural foundation of Spanish identity. This valorisation serves multiple purposes: it allows Vox to position itself as the voice of the so-called "*forgotten Spain*," neglected by mainstream parties and marginalised by urban elites; it aligns the party with traditional values purportedly preserved in the countryside; and it reinforces its opposition to progressive and cosmopolitan agendas commonly associated with urban centres.

The concept of *España vaciada* ("emptied Spain") is reappropriated by Vox as a symbol of both cultural resilience and political grievance. Within this framework, the party presents itself as the authentic defender of rural values and interests. This ruralist discourse is not limited to cultural identity; it is also employed to critique environmental regulations, immigration policies, and cultural liberalism—each of which is framed as a threat to rural livelihoods, traditions, and cohesion. Vox, for instance, contends that climate-related measures impose disproportionate costs and bureaucratic burdens on rural populations. Simultaneously, the party links the presence of immigrants in rural areas to insecurity and social disintegration, thereby reinforcing a narrative in which rurality is construed as both a bastion of authentic national values and a frontline in a broader struggle for cultural and demographic preservation (Vox, 2023).

Within this ideological construction, the countryside is framed not only as a space of economic neglect but as a site of symbolic and political contestation. Vox seeks

to consolidate electoral support in these territories through a synthesis of nationalism, traditionalism, and economic protectionism. The party's embrace of an agrarian populist discourse enables it to portray itself as a staunch advocate for farmers, livestock breeders, and residents of the *España vaciada*. This narrative serves a dual function: on the one hand, it mobilises support in rural areas historically underserved by state policy; on the other, it provides a platform for challenging national and international environmental regulations. In this way, Vox integrates its ruralist message into a broader ideological framework centred on sovereignty, national protection, and economic self-sufficiency (Morillo, 2021).

A particularly salient cultural symbol within this discourse is *tauromaquia* (bullfighting), which Vox defends as a core element of Spain's national heritage. The party frames bullfighting as a tradition under threat from urban elites, animal rights activists, and progressive agendas, thereby transforming its defence into a political act of cultural resistance. By championing *tauromaquia*, Vox reasserts a vision of Spanish identity rooted in continuity, rural customs, and historical legacy. The rural festival and the bullring are thus reimagined not only as sites of cultural expression but as arenas in which the party wages a broader battle over national identity, sovereignty, and tradition (Vox, 2023).

Crucially, this strategic positioning extends beyond rhetoric. In autonomous communities where Vox has entered regional governments—such as Castilla y León, Extremadura, and the Valencian Community—the party has assumed control over ministries responsible for agriculture and rural development. This institutional presence has facilitated the implementation of its political agenda and further reinforced its image as a party genuinely committed to defending rural interests against perceived threats from urban, technocratic, or international elite.

4.2.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2019-2024)

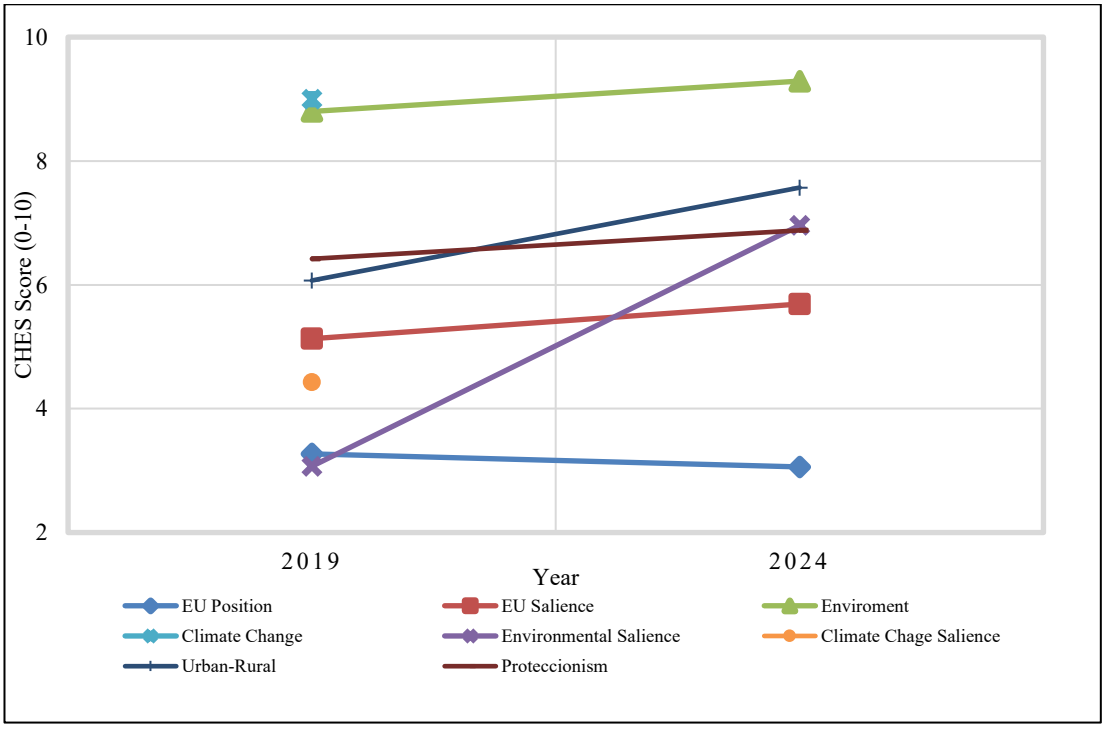
Table 11.Vox´s EU position, environmental and climate attitudes, and ruralism (2019-2024)

Year	European Position		Environment				Ruralism	
	EU Position	EU Salience	Environment	Environmental Salience	Climate Change	Climate Change Salience	Urban-rural	Protectionism
2019	3.27	5.13	8.80	3.07	n/a	n/a	6.07	6.42
2024	3.06	5.69	9.29	6.96	9	4.43	7.57	6.88

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: EU position is measured on a 1–7 scale (1 = strongly anti-EU, 7 = strongly pro-EU). All other items are 0–10. Higher values on Environment and Climate-change policies indicate prioritising economic growth over environmental/climate protection; higher values on Urban–rural indicate stronger emphasis on rural interests; higher values on Protectionism indicate more protectionist stances. Values reported as n/a were not included in the 2019 survey.

Figure *7*.Evolution of Vox´s EU position, environmental and climate attitudes, and ruralism (2019-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 11 and Figure 7 present longitudinal data on EU sovereignty, environmental position and ruralism in Vox´s ideology based on expert assessments from CHES for 2019 and 2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al.,2024). The evidence points to

persistence—and, in key domains, intensification—of these pillars within the party's platform.

Between 2019 and 2024, Vox further consolidates its sovereignty stance vis-à-vis the European Union. On the 1–7 EU position scale (higher values indicating greater support for integration), the party moves marginally away from integration (from 3.27 in 2019 to 3.06 in 2024), while EU salience rises from 8.80 to 9.29. This configuration—stable Euroscepticism coupled with heightened emphasis—aligns with qualitative portrayals of Brussels as a privileged out-group and Commission leaders as ideologically aligned adversaries. Rather than moderating with institutionalisation, Vox normalises a sovereignty cleavage that casts supranational actors as threats to national identity and competences.

Environmental indicators point to a pronounced hardening. The "environment" item on the 0–10 scale (where higher values prioritise economic growth over environmental protection) increases sharply from 3.07 to 6.96, and the broader environmental position summary also rises (from 5.13 to 5.69). In 2024, environmental salience is high (9). On climate specifically, Vox's climate-change score increases from 6.07 to 9.00, while climate-change salience declines from 6.42 to 4.43. Taken together, these shifts corroborate a move from earlier denial or neglect to strategic reframing: "climate" is downplayed as a scientific problem and recast as a distributional and sovereignty conflict—agriculture, transport, and industry "versus Brussels". Recurrent rhetorical tropes—denunciations of "climate fanaticism", appeals to "the voice of farmers", opposition to combustion-engine bans—help explain how harder positions can coexist with lower climate salience.

Ruralism is clearly consolidated by 2024. The urban–rural and protectionism items register 7.57 and 6.88, respectively, signalling a pronounced countryside-centred and producer-side orientation. These levels are consistent with qualitative analyses of Vox's appropriation of the *España vaciada* frame, its defence of emblematic rural traditions (e.g., *tauromaquia*), and its institutional footholds in regional governments with competencies over agriculture and rural development—dynamics that plausibly reinforce both symbolic politics (the countryside as moral community) and policy supply (resistance to EU environmental conditionality; protections for primary sectors).

In sum, the CHES evidence demonstrates the entrenchment—and, in critical arenas, the intensification—of Vox's sovereignty, anti-green, and ruralist pillars between 2019 and 2024. Rather than indicating moderation, the period is characterised by issue intensification and strategic reframing: sovereignty conflicts with the EU become more central; the party's environmental stance hardens decisively towards growth-first positions even as "climate" recedes in salience; and a ruralist/protectionist profile is clearly articulated by 2024. Consistent with the qualitative analysis, these pillars operate less as autonomous agendas than as vehicles reinforcing a broader project of cultural nationalism, anchoring political identity in rural Spain while casting transnational institutions and green regulation as principal out-groups.

4.3 Less state, more market and more nation: economic liberalism and Vox´s working-class strategy

From an economic perspective, Vox articulates a programme grounded in economic liberalism, with strong emphasis on deregulation, fiscal austerity, and tax reductions. The party presents the Spanish economy as overly constrained by bureaucratic overreach and inefficient public spending, positioning itself as a defender of individual freedom in both consumption and employment. This economic orientation contrasts with the prevailing pattern among many European PRR parties, which tend to combine cultural conservatism with welfare chauvinism. In contrast, Vox´s approach aligns more closely with what Kitschelt and McGann (2005) have described as the "old winning formula": the fusion of social traditionalism and economic liberalisation.

Since entering institutional politics in 2019, Vox has consistently advanced a markedly neoliberal agenda, closely intertwined with a national-conservative social vision, as discussed in previous sections. Economists associated with the party, such as Rubén Manso—often described by the media as ultraliberal (González, 2019)—along with public intellectuals aligned with Vox's economic thinking, have advocated for a liberalisation of the Spanish economy modelled on Anglo-Saxon systems (Rallo, 2019; Sánchez de la Cruz, 2019).

A central tenet of Vox´s discourse is that "the less the state intervenes in social life […] the more freedom citizens will enjoy over their own destiny and the greater the possibilities of thriving for businesses, families, and individuals" (Vox, 2015). This

rationale is encapsulated in the slogan “less state, more market”, with exceptions only in matters deemed essential to sovereignty, such as defence, security, or demographic renewal.

Vox’s economic programme includes a significant reduction in taxes for both individuals and businesses. It proposes a simplified personal income tax structure with two brackets: 22% for incomes up to €60,000 and 30% beyond that threshold, significantly reducing the tax burden on higher incomes. It also advocates lowering corporate tax from 25% to 22% or even 20%, and eliminating the wealth tax, inheritance and gift taxes, and municipal capital gains taxes—regarded by the party as confiscatory or duplicative (González, 2019).

In parallel with tax cuts, Vox demands a drastic reduction in public spending, targeting what it calls “unnecessary public expenditure” and redundant administrative structures. Its critique often centres on the Autonomous Communities, which are portrayed as both fiscally irresponsible and politically corrupt. The party denounces the existence of a so-called “autonomous political class”, seen as making the country “ungovernable from an economic perspective” and responsible for some of Spain’s most notorious corruption scandals (Abascal, 2016a). Regional governments are frequently referred to as “taifas”—a historical reference to Muslim principalities in medieval Spain—thus casting them as both extravagant and foreign to the Spanish nation (Abascal, 2016b; Carnicero, 2021).

Vox’s fiscal orthodoxy is further reflected in its repeated calls for strict budgetary discipline. Party representatives point to the country’s historic levels of public debt and criticise the government for increasing public spending by approximately 35% between 2018 and 2023 (Vox, 2024). In parliamentary debates, Vox has urged for a reversal of this trend “before Spain collapses,” arguing that rising public expenditure and revenue collection—outpacing GDP growth—have failed to improve household well-being.

In the area of pensions, Vox proposes reducing the role of the state in favour of individual savings and partial reliance on financial markets. Regarding healthcare, the party advocates a more limited and recentralised public system that guarantees a basic minimum for all—especially for those unable to pay—while encouraging the rest of the population to rely on private services. It also proposes introducing

healthcare co-payments for immigrants who have not resided in Spain for at least five years (elDiario.es, 2019).

In labour market policy, Vox supports a flexible approach with minimal union intervention, cheaper dismissal costs, and a preference for individual rather than collective bargaining. The party opposes the imposition of minimum wages and excessive protections, advocating instead for a liberalised employment model. (elDiario.es, 2019)

Vox's business policy framework aims to foster a low-tax, low-regulation environment for doing business in Spain. However, this pro-market approach is qualified by nationalist elements, such as prioritising Spanish companies and expressing scepticism towards unregulated globalisation (Vox, 2019b).

Regarding welfare and social protection policies, Vox rejects what it considers to be indiscriminate "handouts" that discourage employment and perpetuate dependency, such as the *Ingreso Mínimo Vital* (Minimum Living Income), approved in 2020, which it has strongly criticised (Vox, 2024). Instead, the party advocates for the promotion of quality employment over the expansion of passive subsidies. In line with a form of *welfare nativism*, Vox proposes giving priority to Spanish nationals in access to jobs and benefits. Its trade union, *Solidaridad*, has explicitly called for prioritising national workers in the labour market and facilitating the repatriation of immigrants who are unable to find employment (RTVE,2020). This philosophy is also reflected in Vox's stance on social assistance, where the party demands stricter controls to ensure that benefits are granted exclusively to Spanish citizens or long-term legal immigrants.

In contrast to its hostility towards subsidies, Vox places strong emphasis on supporting the traditional family as the cornerstone of its social policy. The party highlights what it terms a "demographic winter" and accuses successive governments of failing to promote birth rates. It has introduced proposals for a comprehensive national natality plan, which includes substantial reductions in income tax (IRPF) per child, universal free early childhood education (ages 0–3), reduced VAT on essential goods, and increasing public pensions based on the number of children raised. Furthermore, Vox seeks to offer tax incentives to companies that hire women after maternity leave or parents with large families, thereby facilitating work-life balance (Vox, 2025b).

This natalist shift reveals that Vox is not opposed to state intervention per se but rather supports it when aimed at strengthening what it defines as the "backbone of Spain": the family. In this sense, the party envisions a social model in which the state supports families to sustain themselves autonomously, rather than one in which the state provides universal services or unconditional income to all (Vox, 2025b).

Economic liberalism within Vox's discourse is primarily articulated as a critique of public expenditure and state intervention, particularly in relation to budget items the party deems ideological or unproductive. For instance, it advocates the elimination of subsidies to foreign NGOs, international development cooperation, and feminist or LGBTI associations, which it pejoratively labels as *chiringuitos* (a Spanish colloquialism denoting clientelist or parasitic organisations). This orientation is reflected in regional budgets jointly negotiated with the PP, where cuts have been introduced to funding for trade unions, employers' associations, and international cooperation. In Castilla y León, the ministry held by Vox halved funding for trade unions and programmes aimed at women's labour market integration. Part of the savings generated through these cuts was redirected towards initiatives such as the *cheque bebé* (baby voucher) and the promotion of bullfighting (El País, 2023)

At the discursive level, the party constructs a tension between what it portrays as ideological spending and those social sectors allegedly neglected by mainstream parties. This antagonism reinforces the populist nature of Vox's rhetoric, evident in slogans such as "we must choose between Autonomous Communities and pensions" (Europa Press, 2021) or "Spain can live without them". These demands are articulated through the floating signifier *libertad* ("freedom"), which Vox operationalises in terms such as *libertad personal* ("personal freedom") and *libertad de gestión* ("freedom of management") (Vox, 2015, 2016, 2019).

Due to the neoliberal foundations of its economic programme, Vox has struggled to attract voters traditionally aligned with the left. Unlike in several Western European countries, where segments of the working class have shifted their support towards PRR parties, Spanish left-wing voters have demonstrated a greater degree of resistance to such appeals. Consequently, Vox has found it difficult to broaden its electoral base through this particular avenue.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the party has strategically recalibrated its discourse and policy proposals in an effort to compete for the support of disillusioned working-class voters, historically associated with the left. A central element of this strategy was the launch of the *Agenda España* in 2021—a national alternative to the globalist *Agenda 2030*—which set out a package of socioeconomic measures aimed, at least rhetorically, at improving the conditions of workers, supporting the self-employed and small entrepreneurs, and protecting domestic employment from foreign competition. These proposals sought to resonate with the concerns of workers in primary and industrial sectors, positioning Vox as a party responsive to their grievances (Vox, 2021b).

In parallel, Vox has significantly moderated its economic rhetoric and incorporated symbolic references drawn from traditional leftist discourse to enhance its appeal among working-class voters. This includes invoking the historical narrative of workers' struggles and publicly referencing left-wing figures such as Julio Anguita. The party has also intensified its critique of political and economic elites, accusing them of having betrayed the working population, and has increasingly framed its messaging within a national-populist narrative in which the defence of Spanish workers is presented as inseparable from the defence of the nation against external threats.

This discursive shift has served to legitimise Vox as a viable political option for workers disenchanted with the mainstream left, allowing the party to present itself as a new champion of the working class—even if its economic agenda remains firmly rooted on the right. A key component of this strategic realignment was the creation of the trade union *Solidaridad* in September 2020. Designed explicitly to challenge the dominance of traditional unions such as CCOO and UGT—which Vox portrays as corrupt and complicit with the political establishment (Morillo, 2021)—*Solidaridad* functions as an organisational vehicle for disseminating the party's message among workers and staging alternative demonstrations and campaigns.

This "working-class turn" coincided with Vox's consolidation as the third-largest force in the Spanish parliament and reflected its broader ambition to expand its electoral reach. As political scientist José Rama has noted, the party has sought "to stop being the party of the gentry and become the party of the workers"—a strategic

"proletarianisation" that mirrors similar trajectories pursued by radical right parties elsewhere in Europe (Morillo, 2021). However, as several scholars have argued, there exists a fundamental dissonance between Vox's rhetorical shift towards working-class representation and the substantive content of its programme. Its overtly neoliberal economic platform and ultraconservative positions on social and cultural issues may ultimately limit the credibility and resonance of its appeal among working-class voters.

Despite these limitations, Vox's efforts to engage the working-class electorate have had a partial but notable impact, as evidenced by post-electoral analyses following the general elections of 23 July 2023. The party performed well in a number of low-income neighbourhoods and municipalities, particularly in ageing and deindustrialised rural areas where the Socialist Party (PSOE) had traditionally enjoyed strong support. Vox also garnered relatively high levels of support in municipalities with significant foreign-born populations and in areas with a higher proportion of male residents.

However, it would be inaccurate to claim that Vox has supplanted the left as the principal representative of the working class in Spain. Urban working-class strongholds continue to vote predominantly for left-wing parties, and Vox faces substantial barriers in penetrating territories where community networks and trade union structures remain deeply rooted in leftist traditions (RTVE, 2023). Vox's strongest backing comes from segments of the middle and lower-middle classes, especially among male workers employed in traditionally masculine occupations and residents of ageing, economically stagnated rural areas. Although the upper-middle class contributes to the party's support base, it does not represent its electoral core.

4.3.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2019-2024)

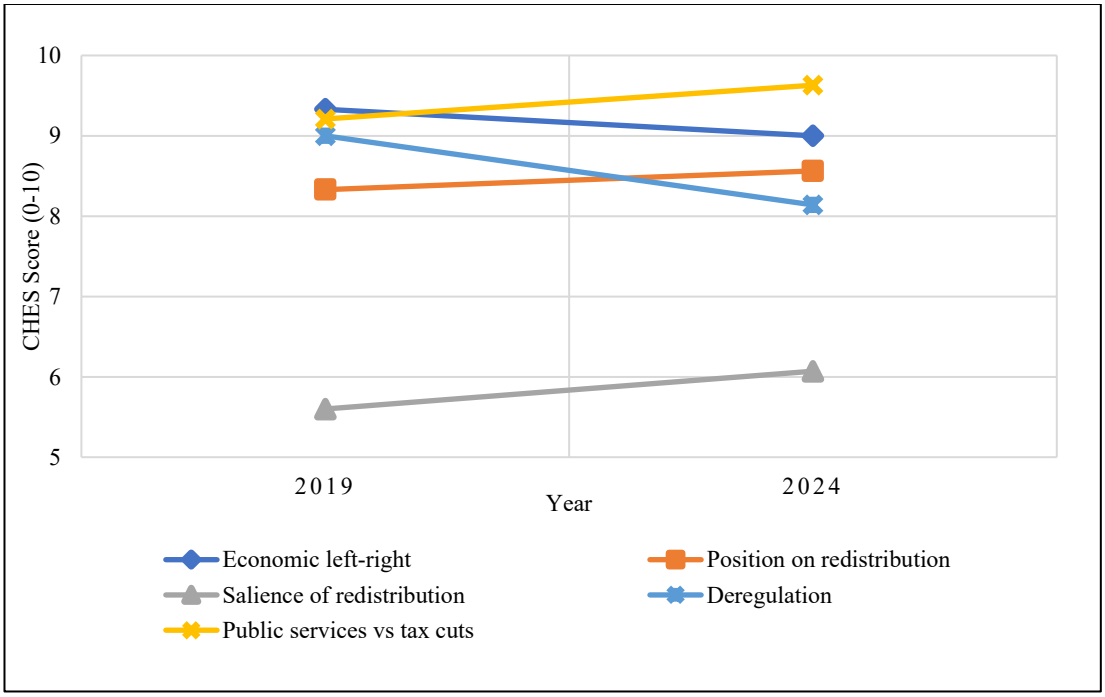
Table 12. Vox's economic positioning (2019-2024)

Year	Economic left-right	Position on redistribution	Salience of redistribution	Public services vs tax cuts	Deregulation	Protectionism
2019	9.33	8.33	5.60	9.21	9.00	6.42
2024	9.00	8.56	6.07	9.63	8.14	6.88

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All variables are measured on a 0–10 scale, with higher values indicating more market-liberal, fiscally conservative or protectionist positions. Scores represent mean expert assessments from the CHES.

Figure 8. Evolution of Vox´s economic position (2019-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 12 and Figure 8 show longitudinal data on Vox's economic positioning, based on expert assessments from the CHES for 2019 and 2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al.,2024). The CHES evidence corroborates the qualitative analysis developed in the previous section regarding Vox's economic orientation. Experts consistently place Vox at the extreme liberal end of the economic spectrum. In 2019, the party was located at 9.33 on the economic left–right scale, a position that remains virtually unchanged in 2024 (9.0). This continuity reflects Vox's entrenched neoliberal outlook, centred on deregulation, fiscal austerity, and tax reductions. Such a profile contrasts with the trajectory of many European PRR parties, which have incorporated elements of welfare chauvinism into their programmes. By contrast, Vox adheres to what Kitschelt and McGann (2005) famously termed the *"old winning formula"*—a fusion of cultural conservatism and economic liberalisation.

Vox's stance on redistribution further underscores this neoliberal orientation. Its opposition has remained consistently high (from 8.33 in 2019 to 8.56 in 2024),

signalling persistent resistance to wealth redistribution and the expansion of social transfers. The salience of redistribution has risen slightly over this period (from 5.6 to 6.07), reflecting Vox's intensified emphasis on fiscal orthodoxy and its critique of what it labels "unnecessary public expenditure" and "clientelist subsidies". This position is consistent with the party's repeated denunciations of the "autonomous political class" and its portrayal of regional governments as fiscally irresponsible taifas.

The CHES data also substantiates Vox's commitment to tax-cutting policies. On the dimension contrasting public services and tax cuts, the party scored 9.21 in 2019 and 9.63 in 2024, confirming its steadfast preference for reducing the tax burden over expanding welfare provision. This aligns with its programme of a simplified personal income tax structure, lower corporate taxation, and the abolition of inheritance and wealth taxes. Vox's position on deregulation likewise reflects strong pro-market leanings, although it shows a slight decrease between 2019 (9.0) and 2024 (8.14). While the party remains firmly neoliberal, this modest adjustment may reflect rhetorical efforts to appeal to disenchanted working-class voters through initiatives such as Agenda España (2021), which emphasised support for small entrepreneurs and domestic workers.

The only dimension where Vox departs from pure neoliberal orthodoxy is protectionism. Moderately positioned at 6.42 in 2019, its score increased to 6.88 in 2024. This suggests the growing presence of economic nationalism, consistent with Vox's discourse on prioritising Spanish companies, repatriating immigrant workers, and resisting unregulated globalisation. The combination of pro-market orthodoxy with selective protectionist elements reflects the broader ideological logic of Vox: a neoliberal economic programme buttressed by nationalist safeguards.

Taken together, the CHES indicators reinforce the conclusions of the qualitative analysis. Vox's economic profile remains rooted in market liberalism, fiscal discipline, and hostility towards redistribution. Yet, as the qualitative evidence has shown, these commitments coexist with discursive adaptations designed to broaden the party's appeal among working-class constituencies—particularly through welfare nativism, the creation of the trade union Solidaridad, and the reframing of "freedom" as liberation from state overreach. The CHES data demonstrate that

these rhetorical adjustments have not translated into substantive programmatic moderation. Instead, Vox's economic identity remains distinctly neoliberal, making it an outlier among PRR parties in Western Europe, while simultaneously incorporating selective elements of economic nationalism that align with its broader nativist and national-conservative project.

4.4 Summary and implications

This chapter has examined the ideological articulation of Vox as the Spanish representative of the PRR, drawing on discursive analysis, programmatic evidence, and data from the CHES (Jolly et al. 2022, 2024),. The findings demonstrate that Vox embodies the three core features of the PRR—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—while simultaneously developing additional ideological dimensions rooted in the Spanish context.

The CHES evidence confirms the persistence and intensification of nativism within Vox's platform. On immigration, multiculturalism, nationalism, and anti-Islam rhetoric, the party consistently registers scores at the upper end of the scale, with a notable radicalisation between 2019 and 2024. This pattern underscores the centrality of a monocultural and exclusionary vision of the nation: one that criminalises irregular immigration, constructs Islam as a civilisational threat, and elevates a Hispanist hierarchy privileging cultural and linguistic affinity with Latin America. Vox's defence of *España viva* (Living Spain) and its rejection of plurinationalism echo long-standing historical cleavages in Spanish politics, drawing on symbolic legacies of the Reconquista and Francoism to frame the nation as unitary, Catholic, and indivisible.

Similarly, the indicators of authoritarianism reveal the party's sustained emphasis on order and security, its reliance on conservative Catholic values, and its selective rejection of liberal rights frameworks—most prominently in relation to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. These findings are consistent with Vox's securitarian discourse on *menas* (unaccompanied migrant minors), its advocacy for harsher sentencing and life imprisonment, and its campaign against feminist and LGBTQ+ organisations, pejoratively labelled as *chiringuitos*. This moral agenda is closely tied to a nostalgic evocation of traditional Catholic values, even if its resonance remains limited in a secularised society.

While less pronounced than in some other PRR cases, populism nevertheless constitutes an essential dimension of Vox's strategy. The CHES data highlight the sharp increase in the party's "people versus elite" score between 2019 and 2024, reflecting its escalating use of anti-elite rhetoric, the construction of a corrupt "political caste", and the delegitimisation of Pedro Sánchez's government as the embodiment of systemic decay. Yet, consistent with the qualitative analysis, populism functions primarily as a strategic instrument subordinated to nationalism: rather than constructing a popular subject, Vox consistently privileges the Spanish nation as the ultimate political community.

At the same time, Vox's ideological identity extends beyond these core elements. Its Euroscepticism, climate and environmental scepticism, and valorisation of rural identity reveal additional programmatic pillars that have become increasingly central to its project. By mobilising the grievances of the *España vaciada*, defending traditions such as bullfighting, and opposing EU environmental regulations, Vox positions itself as the authentic voice of neglected territories against cosmopolitan elites and technocratic impositions. This ruralist and anti-green discourse both reflects and reinforces its institutional footholds in regional governments such as Castilla y León, where Vox has pursued agricultural protectionism, resisted EU environmental conditionality, and redirected resources from feminist associations to natalist policies.

The party's economic agenda further illustrates its distinctive place within the PRR family. Unlike many of its European counterparts, which combine cultural conservatism with welfare chauvinism, Vox advances a markedly neoliberal programme of deregulation, fiscal austerity, and tax reduction. This orientation, consistently confirmed by CHES data, aligns more closely with what Kitschelt and McGann (2005) describe as the "old winning formula": the fusion of market liberalism and social traditionalism. Yet, as the qualitative analysis has shown, Vox has also attempted a partial "working-class turn" through its *Agenda España*, its appeals to national workers, and the creation of the trade union *Solidaridad*. This strategy reflects both the constraints and opportunities of the Spanish context, where the left retains comparatively greater appeal among working-class constituencies and where Francoist legacies of anti-communism, Catholic traditionalism, and centralised nationalism continue to shape political competition.

Taken together, the evidence presented in this chapter supports the argument that Vox should be understood as a traditional expression of the PRR, firmly embedded within the European party family. At the same time, it illustrates a number of features that make the Spanish case distinctive. The fusion of neoliberal economics, Catholic traditionalism, and radical nativism differentiates it from other PRR configurations in Europe. Moreover, its ability to mobilise a nationalist conception of the "real Spain" by weaving together cultural, territorial, and economic grievances demonstrates how the PRR model is adapted to domestic opportunities, institutional arrangements, and historical legacies.

In this sense, Vox is both paradigmatic and exceptional: paradigmatic in its embodiment of the defining traits of the PRR, and exceptional in the manner in which these traits are configured through Spain's unique historical experiences—from the symbolic legacies of the Reconquista and Francoism to the enduring salience of territorial conflict and the centrality of Catholic tradition. Recognising this duality is essential to understanding Vox's trajectory and to situating the Spanish case within the comparative study of the PRR in Europe.

Chapter 5. PiS: a PRR rooted in post-solidarity conservatism

This chapter examines PiS as the Polish representative of the PRR. Building on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, the analysis is structured in three main sections. The first explores how PiS articulates the core ideological features of the PRR— nativism, authoritarianism, and populism- through both discursive strategies and institutional practices. The second section broadens the scope by examining additional ideological dimensions commonly associated with PRR parties, including PiS's Euroscepticism, its valorisation of rural identity and traditions, and its climate scepticism. These complementary elements reinforce the party´s nationalist-conservatist worldwide and contribute to its strategic mobilisation of cultural, economic, and territorial grievances. The third section turns to PiS´economic agenda, its evolution from economic liberalism to redistributive nationalism through the lens of Kitschelt and McGann's (1995) "winning formulas" framework. In doing so, the chapter argues that PiS represents a paradigmatic case of the authoritarian–interventionist variant of the PRR in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe.

5.1 Core features of PRR in PiS

5.1.1 Poland for poles: nativism, catholicism, and ethnic homogeneity

The concept of the nation occupies a central position in the ideology of PiS and is fundamental to understanding both the party´s political project and its vision of contemporary Polish polity. The nation is construed as a community defined by cultural, political, and historical dimensions, which – given Poland´s unique historical experiences- has been shaped predominantly around ethnicity, tradition, and values aligned with Catholicism.

According to PiS, the family constitutes the foundational unit of the nation, as it is regarded as the primary vehicle for the transmission of religious values and historical memory, the cultivation of patriotic attitudes, and the instillation of a sense of national dignity (Gwiazda, 2020). Furthermore, the party maintains that Polish national identity is closely intertwined with Catholicism and explicitly supports the "teaching of the Catholic Church," which it considers providing the moral creed for the Polish people.

Polish identity is thus perceived as inherited, prescriptive, and non- negotiable; any assertion of alternative identities is framed as a threat to the nation's cohesion and integrity (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020).

To reinforce this narrative, PiS strategically mobilises collective memory and draws upon key historical narratives, frequently referencing Poland's past struggles—such as the partitions, World War II, and the resistance against Soviet domination—alongside its achievements, notably the Solidarity movement and the eventual transition to democracy in 1989. By invoking these pivotal moments, the party seeks to construct a continuous sense of national identity rooted in resilience, sacrifice, and perseverance. This selective engagement with history not only fosters a sense of shared purpose and unity among citizens but also serves to legitimise PiS's contemporary political messages concerning sovereignty, self-determination, and resistance to perceived external threats.

In this way, PiS presents current policies and rhetoric as a logical extension of a long- standing historical struggle to preserve Polish independence and cultural integrity, framing both foreign domination and internal challenges to traditional values as new iterations of enduring national threats (Jaskulowski & Majewski, 2023).

Upon assuming government, PiS restructured the national curriculum to reflect its political worldview. Revisions to history education and the introduction of the "History and the Present" course aimed to instil national pride while depicting previous liberal administrations as antagonistic to Polish interests.

The party´s cultural policies closely aligned with its broader nationalist and ethnocentric ideological narrative. The PiS cabinet viewed culture instrumentally - as a means to construct national identity, fostering patriotism, and cultivating a sense of belonging. These policies sought to promote traditional values while defending national identity against perceived threats posed by the political left, the European Union, and what it labels as "moral relativism". Culture thus becomes a crucial terrain in PiS´s identity politics with history and collective memory serving as battlegrounds. The party´s cultural agenda was marked by historical revisionism and a martyrological vision of Poland´s past, invoking a specific mythology to assert ideological control over the present. This approach often depicted Poles as

sole victims of the Second World War and the Holocaust, while dismissing or downplaying narratives acknowledging collaboration (Rado, Mikola, 2024).

PiS consistently emphasises the nation as the fundamental political and social unit, encapsulated in its assertion that "Poland must be a state for Poles." This reflects an explicitly ethnic conception of nationhood, which draws clear boundaries through the exclusion of minorities. The party routinely depicts minority groups as threats to the majority, accusing them of fomenting intergroup conflict and constructing a narrative of competition for resources and cultural dominance. These minorities are portrayed as either unwilling or unable to assimilate, thereby endangering the cultural homogeneity of Polish society. In this context, PiS positions itself as the guardian of the majority's interests and the defender of Polish identity (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020).

A defining feature of PiS's political identity is its stringent anti-immigration stance, particularly towards non-European migrants. This position was starkly demonstrated during the 2015 refugee crisis, when the PiS government intensified its opposition to the European Union and refused to participate in the EU's refugee relocation programme, going so far as to justify the closing of borders. The government framed Syrian and other Middle Eastern migrants as security threats, emphasising their alleged criminality and aggressiveness, and portraying them as culturally incompatible with Poland's homogeneous and Christian national identity. These groups were depicted as individuals whom Poland was neither capable of assimilating nor morally obliged to assist (Drewski & Gerhards, 2025). PiS frequently cited the number of asylum seekers to be relocated to Poland as evidence of a looming threat posed by Muslim immigrants (Kobata & Jacobs, 2023).

This exclusionary rhetoric was vividly illustrated by Jarosław Kaczyński during a parliamentary debate on 16 September 2015, in which he invoked examples from Western Europe to warn against the alleged dangers of multiculturalism:

"If anyone says this is not true, then let's look around Europe. Take Sweden, for example, where there are 54 areas of this country under Sharia law, where the state has no control [...] What is going on in Italy? Churches are taken over and at times are treated as toilets. What is going on in France? Non-stop fights, Sharia law introduced and even patrols checking whether this is observed. The same is the case in London and even in Germany, usually the toughest of places. Do you really want

the same thing to happen in Poland: that we stop feeling at home in our own country? Is this what you want?"

A similarly hardline position was adopted during the 2021 Belarusian border crisis, when the Lukashenko regime orchestrated the movement of migrants—primarily from the Middle East and Africa—into the European Union via Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. The PiS government responded by closing most border crossings with Belarus, declaring a state of emergency in the eastern regions, and constructing a barrier along the Polish Belarusian border (Paczesniak & Winclawska, 2024).

Within the framework of national interest, PiS draws a sharp distinction between categories of non-EU migrants, mainly from Africa and Asia. On one hand are the so-called "legal migrants," depicted as individuals who come to Poland to work and contribute economically. On the other hand, is the "illegal wave of migrants," frequently characterised as young, aggressive men, predominantly Muslims, whom PiS explicitly rejects (Office of the Sejm, 2023a). According to MP Stanisław Pięta (Kobata & Jacobs, 2023):

"Islam is not a religion of peace, but a totalitarian society management system. There isn't the slightest possibility of working out a peaceful agreement. The Islamists came here to kill Europeans and subordinate those who they will not be able to kill"

According to the party, legal migrants are attracted by Poland's economic progress under PiS governance, which has transformed the country into an appealing destination for economic migration. In contrast, "illegal" migrants are framed as a civilisational and security threat. PiS representatives have described these individuals as "intruders" intent on "changing Europe culturally… to destroy, to rape the existing European structures" (Office of the Sejm, 2023a). This narrative is reinforced by repeated references to the physical danger such migrants allegedly pose, with warnings of "riots… robberies of normal Poles… piles of burning cars" (Office of the Sejm, 2023b) and claims that Western Europe's "open-door policy has led to acts of terror" (Office of the Sejm, 2021).

In stark contrast, the PiS government adopted a markedly different stance during the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis following Russia's invasion. Poland opened its borders to millions of Ukrainian refugees (Eurostat, 2023), emphasising the cultural, religious (Christian), and ethnic affinity between Poles and Ukrainians.

The reception of Ukrainian refugees was framed as a natural expression of solidarity between "brotherly nations" and was accompanied by swift institutional action to provide access to social services, education, and employment. As articulated by PiS MP Maciej Wąsik:

"It is our duty to make the migrants, composed mainly of old people, women, and children, feel safe in Poland, to give them refuge in our country, just as we have so many times in our history found refuge when misfortune befell us" (Office of the Sejm, 2022).

5.1.2.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2006-2024)

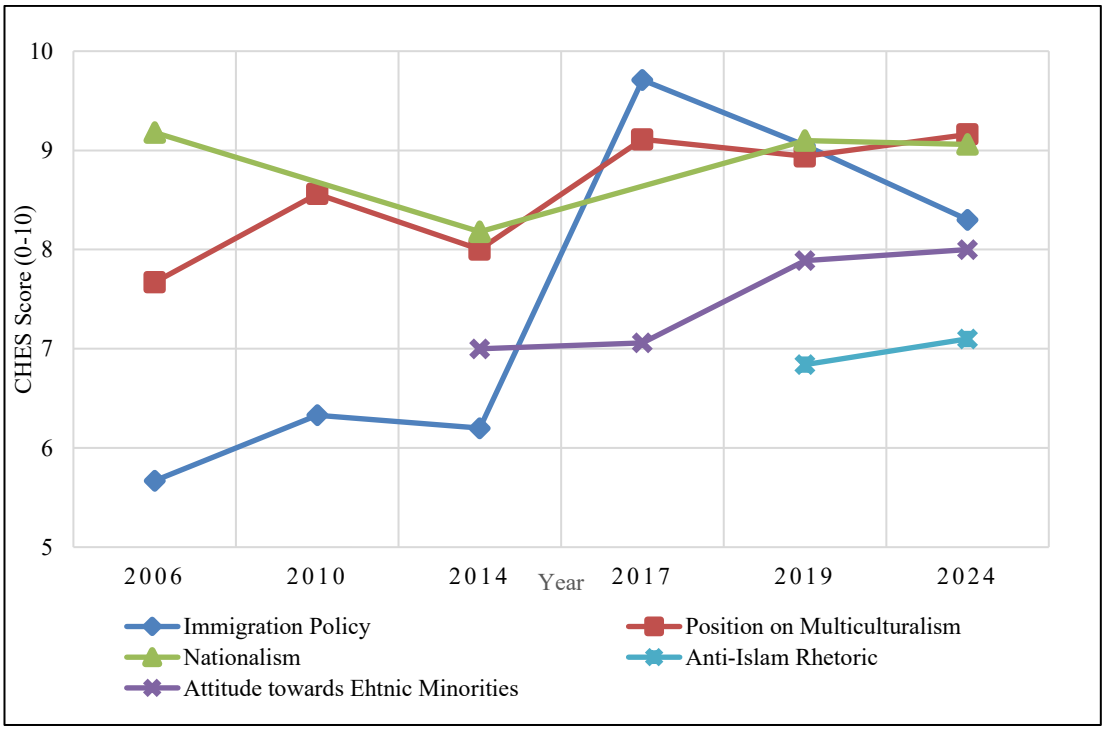
Table 13. Nativism indicators in PiS (2006-2024)

Year	Immigration Policy (position)	Immigration Salience	Multiculturalism (position)	Multiculturalism salience	Nationalism (position)	Attitude towards Ethnic Minorities	Anti-Islam Rhetoric (position)
2002	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2006	5.67	2.33	7.67	3.33	9.17	n/a	n/a
2010	6.33	3.00	8.56	3.50	n/a	n/a	n/a
2014	6.20	n/a	8.00	n/a	8.18	7	n/a
2017	9.71	9.00	9.11	6.33	n/a	7.06	n/a
2019	9.05	7.67	8.94	6.31	9.10	7.89	6.84
2024	8.30	9.04	9.16	6.72	9.06	8.00	7.10

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, following CHES coding. Higher values indicate more exclusionary or nativist positions (e.g., stricter immigration policy, greater salience of immigration, stronger opposition to multiculturalism, more nationalist orientations, negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and more Islamophobic positions. Values reported as n/a indicate missing data for that year.

Figure 9. Evolution of nativism indicators in PiS (2006-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 13 and Figure 9 present the evolution of nativist indicators within PiS, drawing on data from the CHES for the period 2006–2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al.,2024). The dataset provides robust empirical evidence for the progressive consolidation—and in some areas, intensification—of a nativist ideological profile within Poland's PiS. Across all measured dimensions—immigration policy, the salience of immigration and multiculturalism, nationalism, attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and anti-Islam rhetoric—PiS scores consistently near the upper end of the 0–10 scale. These values underscore the centrality of nativism in the party's ideological framework and align it closely with broader trends observed among PRR parties across Europe.

PiS's position on immigration policy demonstrates a clear trajectory of increasing restrictiveness. Its score rises from 5.67 in 2006 to a peak of 9.71 in 2017, before declining slightly to 8.30 in 2023—yet remaining significantly elevated. This trend reflects the party's shift towards a securitised and culturally protectionist approach to immigration, consistent with its broader ethnonationalist orientation. At the same time, the salience of immigration in PiS's political agenda has increased markedly—from a low of 2.33 in 2006 to 9.04 in 2023—indicating the party's

strategic elevation of migration as a core political issue, particularly in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis and its opposition to the EU's relocation quota system.

A parallel dynamic is observable with respect to multiculturalism. PiS has consistently expressed strong opposition to cultural pluralism, with scores rising from an already high 7.67 in 2006 to 9.16 in 2023. The growing salience of multiculturalism in party discourse—doubling from 3.33 to 6.72 over the same period—indicates that PiS has not only rejected multiculturalism in principle, but has also increasingly politicised cultural diversity, framing it as a threat to national cohesion.

The introduction of the nationalism variable in 2014 further reinforces this trend. PiS scored 8.18 in 2014 and exceeded 9.0 in both 2019 and 2023, positioning itself at the highly nationalist end of the ideological spectrum. These scores are complemented by the party's increasingly exclusionary attitudes towards ethnic minorities (rising from 7.00 in 2014 to 8.00 in 2023) and its intensifying anti-Islam rhetoric (increasing from 6.84 in 2019 to 7.10 in 2023). These indicators highlight PiS's tendency to frame religious and ethnic difference—particularly Islam—as fundamentally incompatible with Polish national identity.

Taken together, these trends confirm the consolidation of a robust nativist profile within PiS. The party articulates a nationalist, culturally monist, and anti-pluralist vision of the Polish nation, in which ethnic and religious homogeneity are presented as essential to national unity. The convergence of restrictive immigration policies, rejection of multiculturalism, high levels of nationalism, and the stigmatisation of ethnic and religious minorities situates PiS firmly within the paradigm of nativist political parties, particularly within the post-communist context of Central and Eastern Europe.

5.1.2 Authoritarianism and politics of order: state power, traditional values and democratic backsliding

Authoritarianism constitutes a defining element of the identity of PiS, which positions itself as the guarantor of public order, national security, and social stability. The party advocates for a more efficient and robust state, one that is strong both externally and internally, to ensure national security, command respect, and promote traditional values.

True to its name, Law and Justice, the party has firmly established itself on issues of law and order, anchored its platform in law-and-order politics, portraying security policies and law enforcement as essential tools for safeguarding Polish sovereignty and maintaining internal order. Securitisation has become a central pillar of its discourse, with PiS consistently advocating the expansion of police powers and the imposition of harsher penalties. A salient example is the party's response to successive waves of migration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries, which PiS has depicted as a significant threat to Polish identity, culture, and security (Kobata & Jacobs, 2022). Notably, in September 2021, the government declared a state of emergency in the border regions of Podlaskie and Lublin in response to increased migratory pressure from Belarus (Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2021). This was followed, in January 2022, by the construction of a 186-kilometre border barrier along the Belarusian frontier, intended to prevent the arrival of irregular migrants.

PiS has been especially critical of the post-communist regime of the Third Polish Republic, describing it as "weak and powerless when it should defend the interests of the individual, the family, society and nation". In its founding manifesto, the party called for a decisive break with the legacy of the PRL, placing decommunisation—particularly the vetting of former PRL officials—at the centre of its agenda. Although this process was ultimately halted by the Constitutional Tribunal, it became a central theme of PiS's first government. A parallel initiative, the so-called "*Fourth Republic*", envisioned a transition from the parliamentary model of the Third Republic to a more centralised and executive- dominant system. While this constitutional project was formally abandoned (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020), its underlying logic—centralisation of power, erosion of institutional checks and balances, and the weakening of judicial independence—persisted and was

actively implemented after PiS returned to power in 2015. As a result, Poland has experienced a significant decline in democratic standards, becoming a paradigmatic case of what scholars refer to as “democratic backsliding” (Sadurski, 2019).

A key dimension of PiS’s authoritarian orientation lies in its approach to media pluralism. Prior to assuming office in 2015, the party was sharply critical of what it perceived as biased treatment by the media—particularly by public broadcasters—and called for the “rebuilding” of media pluralism (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020). Upon taking office, PiS introduced sweeping reforms aimed at subordinating public media to direct political control. The creation of the National Media Council (RMN), dominated by party members and allies, facilitated the transformation of public television and radio into vehicles of government propaganda, primarily tasked with promoting the party’s agenda and discrediting the opposition (Agenda Pública, 2024).

In parallel, PiS pursued a similarly confrontational stance towards the judiciary. The party condemned the continued presence of judges whose careers began under the PRL and denounced what it characterised as inefficiency and corruption within the judiciary. However, its critique extended beyond calls for generational renewal or anti-corruption measures. PiS fundamentally challenged the principle of judicial independence. The party’s programme states explicitly that “the people cannot be denied influence over the functioning of this third power”. According to this view, courts should serve society rather than operate autonomously. To that end, PiS advocated for increased oversight of the judiciary by the “sovereign” (the people), exercised through their parliamentary representatives—thus effectively linking the judiciary to the legislature and, by extension, the executive. This rationale also underpinned PiS’s initiative to merge the Ministry of Justice with the Office of the Prosecutor General, a move designed to subordinate prosecutorial functions to political authority (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020).

Following its electoral victory in 2015, PiS began to implement these changes. The offices of Minister of Justice and Prosecutor General were merged, granting the government direct control over criminal policy and the appointment of prosecutors. The independence and authority of the Constitutional Tribunal were substantially eroded through the appointment of ideologically aligned judges and procedural modifications. The retirement age for Supreme Court judges was lowered, resulting

in the forced departure of numerous magistrates and allowing for their replacement with individuals loyal to the government. Moreover, the National Council of the Judiciary was restructured: previously elected primarily by judges, it became largely appointed by Parliament, which at the time was controlled by PiS.

Beyond institutional power, PiS's authoritarian tendencies have also found expression in the cultural sphere, where symbolic control plays an equally strategic role.-Authoritarian tendencies within the PiS government also manifested prominently in the realm of cultural policy. The PiS administration underscored the strategic importance of culture by elevating the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, appointing its minister, Piotr Gliński, as Deputy Prime Minister. This move signalled the centrality of cultural governance to the government's broader political project. The implementation of PiS's illiberal cultural agenda was marked by indirect coercion, politically motivated appointments, and fluctuating public funding. These mechanisms were accompanied by instances of censorship and the suppression of dissenting artistic voices.

Under Minister Gliński's leadership, numerous cultural institutions were brought into alignment with government interests, often through unlawful or controversial leadership changes that provoked internal unrest. Contemporary art forms were increasingly marginalised, while national heritage, folk traditions, and religious values received preferential institutional support. Prominent institutions such as the National Museum in Warsaw and the Museum of Contemporary Art experienced notable declines in public trust and artist participation, reflecting broader dissatisfaction with the government's cultural direction.

Where direct control was not feasible, PiS resorted to alternative strategies, including the withdrawal of public funding and the establishment of parallel institutions to promote its nationalist ideological agenda. For instance, the Institute of Solidarity Heritage was created as a counterweight to the European Centre of Solidarity, while entities such as the Pilecki Institute further entrenched the government's cultural narrative. The strategic appointment of loyalist leadership enabled indirect censorship, often leading to the exclusion of non-aligned staff and the marginalisation of critical perspectives.

This repressive environment culminated in high-profile incidents of artistic persecution, exemplified by the prosecution of an artist for distributing an image of

the Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo. Such episodes epitomise the broader erosion of cultural pluralism and freedom of expression in Poland under the PiS government between 2015 and 2023 (Rado & Mikola, 2024).

PiS's authoritarianism is deeply intertwined with the promotion of traditional values, particularly through a rigidly socially conservative worldview that forms a central pillar of the party's ideological identity. Among these values, Catholicism plays a particularly prominent—arguably the most significant—role in shaping the party's conception of social order, the family, and human rights. Rather than constituting a mere cultural reference, Catholicism underpins PiS's broader normative project, offering a moral and ideological foundation for its vision of Polish society.

Although PiS's founding manifesto contained limited references to the Catholic Church, a marked shift occurred around 2005, coinciding with the party's "Fourth Republic" initiative and the drafting of the so-called *Catholic Constitution*. This proposal aimed to elevate Catholicism as Poland's dominant religion and embed its values in public life, seeking to rectify what PiS viewed as the deficiencies of the 1997 Constitution (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020). The preamble of this document was explicit: "In the name of God Almighty," accompanied by a firm affirmation of "Christian values" . In PiS discourse, Christianity is not only a personal or spiritual reference but a civilisational framework. This perspective is epitomised by the party's formulation: "For believers, Catholicism is truth; for non-believers, it represents civilisation." Faith, therefore, is presented as an essential organising principle for both cultural and political life (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020).

The Catholic Church is thus assigned a central role in PiS's vision of Polish society. The party argues that, particularly during the communist era, the Church functioned as "a pillar of Polishness and a substitute for the non-existent sovereign state" (PiS, 2014). Catholic doctrine, tradition, and patriotism are described as mutually reinforcing elements in the construction of national political identity. This ideological alignment is further reinforced through PiS's longstanding alliance with influential sectors of the Catholic hierarchy, most notably its relationship with Radio Maryja and its director, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk. This connection has become a defining feature of PiS's political identity and a critical asset in mobilising segments of the electorate (Pankowski, 2010).

In practice, PiS has developed a historical policy aimed at cultivating national pride and reinforcing a symbolic sense of unity and patriotism. At the core of this strategy is the party's partnership with the Catholic Church, framed as the custodian of traditional Polish values. A key example is the construction of the *Memory and Identity Museum of St. John Paul II* in Toruń, built in collaboration with Radio Maryja's supporters. This project reflects PiS's effort to present itself as a bulwark against secularism and liberal cosmopolitanism, positioning Catholicism as a cornerstone of both national identity and state legitimacy.

This partnership has also shaped PiS's educational agenda. The party has actively promoted curricula that prioritise traditional values over scientific or rights-based approaches. The *"Preparation for Family Life"* programme, for example, largely excludes comprehensive sex education, instead reinforcing traditional gender roles and stigmatising alternative lifestyles—an approach that deviates significantly from WHO standards (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Moreover, the introduction of the "Lex Czarnek" reform (named after Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek) further consolidated state control over education. This legislation empowered government-appointed school superintendents to veto extracurricular programmes organised by NGOs—an initiative clearly aimed at curtailing liberal sex education and gender equality workshops in schools (Margolis, 2022). In this context, educational policy became a key instrument for reinforcing conservative values, often shaped in response to demands from Church authorities (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020).

Rooted in Christian doctrine, PiS also advocates unequivocally for traditional family structures. The family is defined as "the basic unit of society with unquestionable rights" (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020) and described as "a lasting relationship between a woman and a man" (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020). Consistent with its socially conservative orientation, PiS promotes traditional gender roles, portraying women primarily as mothers and caregivers. The party asserts that the state has a duty to protect pregnant women and mothers, and it has pledged to increase social benefits for families and for men who choose to leave the labour market to raise children. These proposals include pension provision and a reduction in the retirement age for women to 60 (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020). This policy framework is deeply rooted in Polish historical narratives, particularly the

archetype of the *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother), whose social value is constructed around fertility, self-sacrifice, and service to the nation (Gwiazda, 2020). Minister Czarnek has epitomised this worldview by asserting that a woman's primary role is motherhood, praising her "destiny to bear children."

In parallel, PiS has developed a powerful anti-gender discourse, in which the term "gender ideology" functions as a catch-all pejorative used to discredit progressive views on gender and sexuality as foreign and corrosive to national values. According to this rhetoric, feminism and gender equality agendas are cast as existential threats to Polish identity, which must be defended through the reassertion of Catholic values and the traditional family model. The party's alliance with ultra-conservative institutions—such as Ordo Iuris—has strengthened this ideological stance. In this context, PiS has adopted an unwavering anti-abortion position, advocating for the legal protection of life from conception. Upon taking office, the party implemented a series of regressive measures: withdrawing public funding for in vitro fertilisation, limiting access to emergency contraception, and introducing some of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, including a near-total ban even in cases of foetal abnormality. These measures followed the failed 2016 attempt to enact a total abortion ban, which sparked the mass Black Protest demonstrations (Religa, 2019).

PiS also sought to undermine Poland's international commitments to gender equality. In July 2020, Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro announced plans to withdraw from the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, denouncing it as a "leftist" document and objecting to its definition of gender as a social construct. Although the government ultimately refrained from formal withdrawal following public and international backlash, it froze implementation of the Convention and requested a review by the Constitutional Tribunal regarding its compatibility with the Polish Constitution (Santora, 2020).

The party's authoritarian discourse extends to the systematic targeting of the LGBT+ community. Since 2019, PiS has significantly intensified its anti-LGBT+ rhetoric, portraying the community as a foreign import that threatens Poland's cultural homogeneity and traditional values. According to the party, the LGBT+ movement undermines national unity and constitutes a dangerous ideological agenda aligned with progressive and leftist elites. Party leaders routinely

characterise LGBT+ activists as elitist and "anti-Polish", accusing them of demanding privileges rather than equal rights. For example, party leader Jarosław Kaczyński has described the LGBT+ movement as an imported threat and a cultural assault from which "we need to protect our children". The party regularly employs inflammatory language, using terms such as "rainbow plague", "leftist avalanche", "sick ideology", and "sexualisation of children"—ideologically charged slurs designed to delegitimise the movement rather than individual LGBT+ persons (Yermakova, 2021).

The PiS narrative contends that demands for LGBT+ equality conceal a radical ideological project. A recurring refrain claims: "LGBT want equal rights. Not true! They want privileges… this is an attack on our identity. On Polish culture." Although the party nominally distinguishes between individuals and ideology, the discursive dehumanisation of the movement has had tangible consequences for LGBT+ people in Poland.

This dehumanising rhetoric parallels PiS's discourse on refugees, in which metaphors such as "flood" and allusions to Nazi-era language have been invoked. Such discourse stands in stark contrast with the party's professed Christian values of compassion and human dignity. During the 2020 presidential campaign, for instance, PiS-backed candidate Andrzej Duda claimed that LGBT+ people "are trying to convince us that this is people, but this is just an ideology"—a remark that triggered widespread protests across the country. Duda went further, describing the promotion of LGBT+ rights as "an ideology more destructive than communism".

The cumulative effect of this rhetoric has had severe social repercussions. Public tolerance of queer identities has declined, and hostility towards LGBT+ individuals has grown. Hate speech—including references to a "rainbow plague"—and incidents of violence have become increasingly common. One of the most high-profile cases occurred during the July 2019 LGBT+ Pride march in Białystok, where far-right groups violently attacked demonstrators (Chowaniec et al., 2021). Between 2019 and 2024, several local authorities—primarily in south-eastern Poland and governed by PiS or its affiliates—declared themselves "LGBT-free zones". Although largely symbolic and unenforceable under Polish and EU anti-discrimination law, these declarations exacerbated social exclusion. Reports from

affected areas indicate a rise in stigma, hostility, and marginalisation (Żuk & Pacześniak., 2023).

A further dimension of PiS's authoritarian strategy lies in its orchestrated ideological and cultural "counter-revolution", pursued both discursively and institutionally. Upon taking office, PiS dismantled key mechanisms for combating discrimination, including the Council for Counteracting Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Intolerance. NGOs delivering anti-discrimination workshops were excluded from public schools, and government funding was withdrawn from numerous civil society initiatives—such as Blue Line, a crisis helpline for vulnerable youth. Party officials consistently framed conservative and traditionalist values as the foundations of national identity, while deriding liberal values. This approach was exemplified by former Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski, who mocked what he described as a "Marxist pattern" promoting "a new mix of cultures and races, a world of cyclists and vegetarians" (Sadurski, 2019).

5.1.2.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2002-2024)

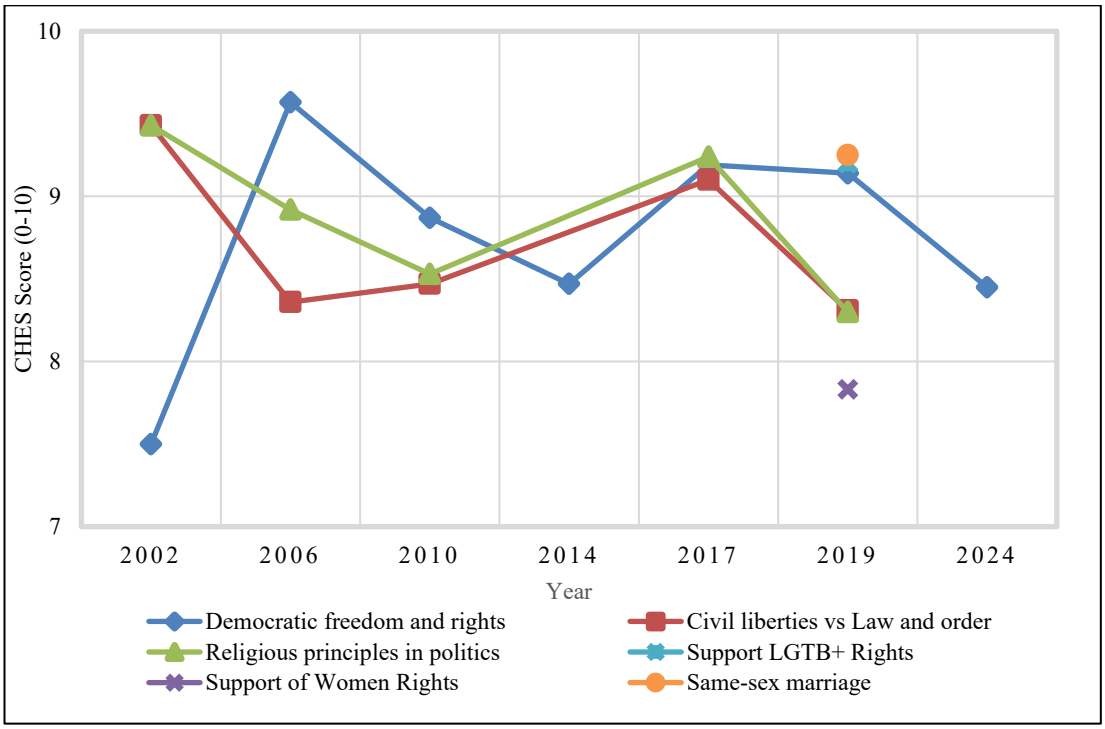
Table 14. Authoritarianism indicators for PiS (2002-2024)

Year	Democratic Freedom and Rights (position)	Civil liberties vs Law and Order (salience)	Civil Liberties vs Law and Order (position)	Religious principles in politics (position)	Support for Women Rights	Support for LGBT+ Rights	Same-Sex Marriage (position)
2002	7.50	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2006	9.57	9.43	n/a	9.43	n/a	n/a	n/a
2010	8.87	8.36	n/a	8.92	n/a	n/a	n/a
2014	8.47	8.47	8.35	8.53	n/a	n/a	n/a
2017	9.19	n/a	8.29	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2019	9.14	9.10	8.67	9.24	n/a	n/a	n/a
2024	8.45	8.31	7.97	8.30	7.83	9.20	9.25

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, following CHES coding. Higher values indicate stronger authoritarian or traditionalist positions: greater restrictions on democratic freedoms and rights, stronger emphasis on law-and-order over civil liberties, greater influence of religion Values reported as n/a indicate missing data for that year.

Figure 10. Evolution of authoritarianism indicators for PiS (2002-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 14 and Figure 10 present longitudinal data on indicators of authoritarianism within PiS, based on expert assessments from the CHES for the period 2002–2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al., 2024). The data provide robust empirical evidence of both the persistence and consolidation of authoritarian ideological elements in the party's platform. Across multiple dimensions—including democratic freedoms, civil liberties, religious conservatism, and, more recently, gender and sexual rights—PiS consistently records values at the upper end of the 0–10 scale. These trends underscore the centrality of authoritarianism to the party's political orientation.

PiS already displayed elevated authoritarian tendencies at the outset of the period. In 2002, its score on democratic freedoms and rights stood at 7.50, rising sharply to 9.57 by 2006—a moment of consolidation of its law-and-order profile. Although this indicator declines modestly to 8.45 in 2024, the trajectory nonetheless reflects a sustained departure from liberal democratic norms in favour of a more restrictive, security-oriented vision of governance. A comparable pattern is observed in the civil liberties versus law-and-order dimension: while the salience of this issue remains consistently high, PiS's position declines from 8.47 in 2014 to 7.97 in 2024,

signalling its increased prioritisation of state authority at the expense of individual freedoms.

Religious conservatism remains a core ideological pillar of the party. Throughout the period examined, PiS consistently records scores above 8 in this domain, confirming the enduring role of religious values—particularly Catholic doctrine—in shaping its resistance to liberal social reforms and fostering a culturally exclusionary understanding of national identity.

The introduction of new variables in the 2024 CHES dataset provides further insight into the party's ideological trajectory. PiS's score of 7.83 on support for women's rights suggests a highly selective and ideologically constrained endorsement, consistent with its broader promotion of traditional gender roles and opposition to feminist policy agendas. Even more striking are its positions on sexual diversity: PiS records extremely high levels of opposition to LGBTQ+ rights (9.20) and same-sex marriage (9.25), reflecting an entrenched rejection of sexual minority rights and a firm alignment with traditionalist, heteronormative values.

Taken together, these findings confirm the consolidation of PiS as a paradigmatic case of authoritarian conservatism in Central and Eastern Europe. The CHES indicators highlight its consistent emphasis on state-centred authority, law-and-order politics, religious conservatism, and hostility towards gender equality and LGTBQ+ rights. These patterns resonate with programmatic evidence: PiS's securitarian responses to migration, its systematic weakening of judicial and media independence, its partnership with the Catholic Church, and its campaigns against feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. The convergence of these dynamics positions PiS as both an ideologically authoritarian and socially traditionalist party, firmly embedded within the broader European PRR family.

5.1.3 The people against the elites: populism, redistribution, and sovereignty

Populism has consistently constituted a central element in PiS's political discourse, grounded in a critical assessment of Poland 'post-communist transformation and the elites associated with it. Since its electoral victory in 2015, the party has expanded its populist rhetoric to address social inequalities through redistributive economic policies, presented as a corrective to the perceived failures of the post-1989 PiS's conception of the elites is shaped by a specific diagnosis of Poland's transition, which has been fundamental to the party's ideological narrative since its inception. The party characterises the Third Republic as a mere "decade of democratic rule", in which democratic procedures were introduced but without a parallel renewal of the political elite. PiS's critique of the post-1989 settlement centres on the empowerment of the former nomenklatura and the emergence of oligarchic networks that accumulated disproportionate economic and political power. The party also condemned the liberal economic reforms implemented during this period, arguing that they resulted in an unequal distribution of the burdens of transition across Polish society (Lewandowski & Polakowski, 2024).

According to PiS, the political elite represented an alliance between post-communist actors and liberal factions of the former Solidarity movement, both of whom it held responsible for the degradation of Poland's democratic institutions. In this view, the post-communist state was only partially democratic, with weak institutional foundations—particularly in the judiciary—rendering them susceptible to corruption and elite capture. PiS's 2005 programme argued that elite-led decisions in the post-transition era had imposed disproportionate social costs and contributed to widespread economic hardship. Rather than fostering inclusive capitalism, the party portrayed the new order as "political capitalism".

A defining feature of PiS's populism lies in its linguistic polarisation between "the people" and "the elites". In the early 2000s, the party employed pejorative terms such as *łże-elity* ("false elites") and *wykształciuchy* (a derogatory label for intellectuals). These terms later evolved into the broader concept of the "Tusk system", used to describe what PiS framed as a distortion of democracy both in substance and form. As Sanecka-Tyczyńska (2011) notes, PiS's discourse increasingly centred on "the ruling class of the Third Republic", encompassing political, economic, and academic elites.

Consistent with right-wing populist frameworks, PiS called for the replacement of this entrenched elite with a new leadership—one that is patriotic, moral, and aligned with the interests of ordinary citizens. Party leader Jarosław Kaczyński articulated this logic by arguing that elections only fulfil their democratic function when they offer genuine alternatives in terms of actions, programmes, and leadership:

"*Elections make sense when they are a choice among different possible actions, different programmes and different élites. If there is no real choice, if nearly everyone is to say—and above all do—the same, then there is no democracy." (*Alekseev, 2024*)*

To restore democratic legitimacy, PiS emphasised popular sovereignty and institutional responsiveness to the everyday concerns of citizens. These themes featured prominently in the 2015 campaign, with slogans such as *Bliżej ludzi* ("Closer to the people") and *Służyć ludziom. Słuchać Polaków* ("Serve the people. Listen to Poles") highlighting its populist appeal. The campaign targeted rural and small-town voters—known as *Polska powiatowa* (provincial Poland)—who felt marginalised by the urban liberal elite. The imperative to "listen to the people" was symbolically reinforced at the June 2015 party congress, where Beata Szydło was announced as the party's prime ministerial candidate. Her speech stressed the importance of maintaining direct contact with citizens and addressing their daily struggles, particularly in areas lacking basic infrastructure such as rail access.

PiS further asserted the people's right to hold elites accountable, promoting a discourse centred on restoring dignity and agency to the Polish nation. Within its ideological framework, "the nation" is conceived as a homogeneous moral community, in contrast to liberal pluralist ideals. This vision draws heavily on traditions of solidarity and Catholic social teaching (Lewandoski & Polakowski, 2019).

The 2015 migration crisis provided fertile ground for PiS to reinforce its populist narrative by integrating issues of national identity and cultural security. The party strongly opposed EU relocation schemes for refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, framing them as externally imposed threats to Poland's ethnic homogeneity and sovereignty. Exploiting fears of terrorism and cultural alienation, PiS positioned itself as a defender of Catholic and national values against liberal

cosmopolitanism. National identity, in this narrative, became a strategic asset requiring active state protection.

The sense of socioeconomic exclusion—shaped by two decades of systemic transformation—gradually came to dominate public discourse, amplifying public dissatisfaction with the post-1989 trajectory. Long vocal about these issues, PiS capitalised on rising inequality and alienation to craft a compelling populist message in the run-up to its 2015 electoral victory.

Within this framework, PiS positioned itself as the authentic representative of "ordinary Poles" in opposition to a self-serving and detached elite. This dichotomy was strengthened by its critique of neoliberal reforms and of Poland's dependent integration into global capitalism, which the party blamed for social fragmentation and the erosion of national sovereignty. In its 2019 programme, PiS encapsulated this critique with the statement: "the economy is to serve our state and Polish society, and not the other way round." This encapsulated its ambition to reorient public policy in service of "the people", conceived as a culturally cohesive moral majority.

To realise this vision—further discussed below—PiS advanced a "Polish model of prosperity" based on welfare expansion. Flagship initiatives included the 500+ child benefit programme, the thirteenth pension, the lowering of the retirement age, and the broadening of social entitlements. These policies were not only redistributive but also symbolically resonant, serving as concrete manifestations of PiS's commitment to dignity, solidarity, and national justice.

Importantly, these economic measures were embedded in a wider ideological project that fused social protection with cultural conservatism. PiS envisioned a distinctively Polish welfare model—one that improved material conditions while preserving national traditions. Redistribution, in this context, was both instrumental and ideological, reinforcing the legitimacy of the party's appeal to the "true people" as the rightful source of political authority.

Finally, PiS's populist framing has been instrumental in defining its antagonistic relationship with European institutions. The party consistently portrays the EU—particularly the Commission and the Court of Justice of the EU—as a remote and unaccountable elite, disconnected from national interests and cultural values. EU criticism of PiS's judicial reforms, rule-of-law breaches, and minority rights

policies is framed as illegitimate foreign interference or "cultural colonisation" (Lewandoski & Polakowski, 2019).

A particularly salient example is PiS's defiant response to EU sanctions concerning its judicial reforms. The party framed these reforms not only as necessary to dismantle post-communist networks but also as a legitimate act of national self-determination. In related areas—such as migration, family policy, and LGBT+ rights—PiS has accused the EU of imposing alien moral frameworks in Poland. Through this discourse, the party presents itself as the protector of national sovereignty, identity, and democratic authenticity against the perceived encroachments of supranational technocracy.

5.1.3.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2014-2024)

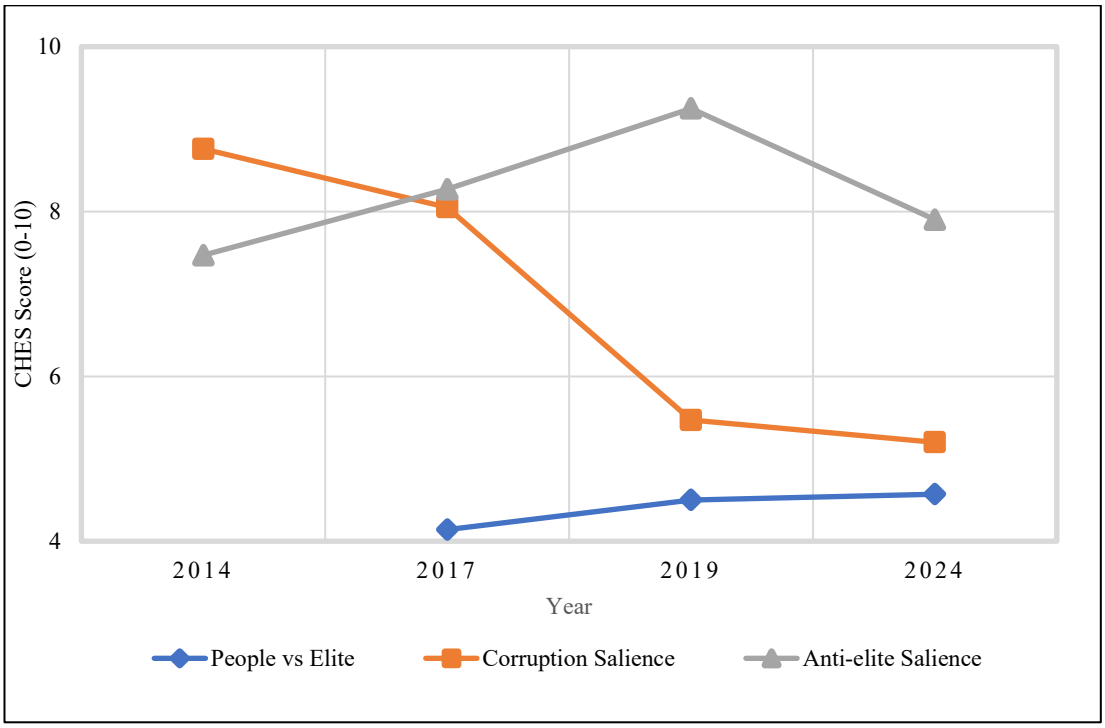
Table 15. Populist indicators for PiS (2014-2024)

Year	People vs Elite (position)	Corruption Salience	Anti-elite Salience
2014	n/a	8.76	7.47
2017	4.14	8.05	8.27
2019	4.50	5.47	9.25
2024	4.57	5.20	7.90

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, following CHES coding. Higher values indicate a stronger "people versus elite" stance and greater salience of corruption and anti-elite rhetoric.

Figure 11. Evolution of populism indicators for PiS (2014-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 15 and Figure 11 present longitudinal data on indicators of populism within PiS, based on expert assessments from the CHES for the years 2014 and 2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al.,2024). The data provide compelling empirical evidence of the persistence—and, in some areas, intensification—of populist ideological components within the party's platform. PiS consistently records scores at the upper end of the 0–10 scale across a range of dimensions—people vs elite, corruption salience and anti-elite Salience- underscoring the centrality of these themes in its political strategy. These findings lend robust empirical support to the classification of PiS as PRR party within the post-communist European context

The anti-elite salience dimension reveals a marked upward trajectory from 2014 to 2019, increasing from 7.47 to a peak of 9.25. This period coincides with PiS's consolidation in government and the sharpening of its discursive attacks on post-communist, liberal, and supranational elites. This trend directly reflects the evidence of the party's framing of Poland's post-1989 transformation as a "façade of democracy" dominated by entrenched nomenklatura and liberal elites. By portraying the Third Republic as an oligarchic system that excluded "ordinary Poles", PiS reinforced its anti-elitist credentials. Although the score decreases to 7.90 in 2024, the data still reflect a sustained emphasis on anti-elite rhetoric—

consistent with the party's discourse on EU "cultural colonisation" and its depiction of supranational institutions as detached, illegitimate elites.

By contrast, the corruption salience indicator exhibits a pronounced decline. Initially high at 8.05 in 2017, it falls to 5.47 in 2019 and further to 5.20 in 2024. This decline reflects the diminished credibility of anti-corruption rhetoric once PiS assumed executive office. As the party entrenched itself in power, anti-corruption discourse lost its mobilising force, echoing the broader tension between populist critique and the responsibilities of incumbency.

The people–elite cleavage indicator displays sharp decline and stabilisation at relatively low levels. After reaching 8.76 in 2014—prior to PiS's return to power—it drops to 4.14 in 2017 and remains low thereafter (4.50 in 2019 and 4.57 in 2024). This dynamic corresponds with a qualitative shift in strategy. Once in government, PiS increasingly prioritised a nationalist-conservative narrative over overt populist appeals, presenting itself as the defender of Catholic values, traditional family structures, and Polish sovereignty. Populism was thus not abandoned but reconfigured: rather than constructing a popular subject in purely majoritarian terms, PiS embedded its populism within a broader ideological project centred on nation, tradition, and sovereignty.

Taken together, the CHES data confirm that PiS's populism is both persistent and strategically adaptive. While certain dimensions—most notably the people–elite cleavage—have moderated since the party's return to power, its reliance on anti-elitist discourse, redistributive promises, and the symbolic defence of national sovereignty ensures that populism remains central to its identity as a PRR party. This synthesis underscores how populist mobilisation in Poland has been recalibrated under conditions of incumbency, merging socio-economic redistribution with cultural conservatism and nationalist resistance to supranational elites.

5.2. Beyond the core: additional ideological pillars

While nativism, authoritarianism, and populism constitute the core ideological components of PRR parties—exemplified in the case of PiS —these formations also engage with additional ideologically salient dimensions. In the case of PiS, three stand out: a pronounced Euroscepticism, a form of ruralism that idealises countryside life as the essence of national identity, and staunch opposition to supranational climate policies.

Since Poland's accession to the EU, PiS has increasingly portrayed Brussels as a principal antagonist—depicted variously as an ideological adversary, an authoritarian bureaucracy, and a threat to national self-determination. Although PiS supported EU membership during the pre-accession period, it gradually adopted a more critical posture, seeking to slow the pace of political integration. While intensifying its rhetorical opposition over time, PiS has stopped short of embracing hard Euroscepticism (Aslan, 2022). Instead, its leaders define their position as "Euro-realism", asserting that EU membership is acceptable only insofar as national sovereignty is fully preserved-

PiS routinely accuses the EU of imposing liberal norms and regulatory standards that infringe upon Polish autonomy. Although avoiding explicit calls for "Polexit", the party often characterises the EU as an interventionist force. As Jarosław Kaczyński stated: Poland "wants to be in the EU", but only as a "sovereign state", not one "dictated by Brussels" (Gera, 2021).

The heart of PiS's conflict with the EU lies in a dispute over ideological sovereignty. Efforts by EU institutions to enforce democratic norms, judicial independence, and minority rights are framed by PiS as illegitimate intrusions into national affairs. In 2021, responding to EU legal action over judicial reforms, Kaczyński denounced the primacy of EU law as an "incredible demand that undermines the foundations of our sovereignty and constitutional order" (Reuters,2021). He argued that the EU was using legal mechanisms to impose a "new revolutionary order" incompatible with Poland's conservative identity.

Party elites frequently portray the EU as a hegemonic liberal regime driven by "Brussels bureaucracy" and committed to ideological engineering. This narrative has included inflammatory historical analogies. In 2021, PiS MP Marek Suski controversially stated that Poland would "fight against the Brussels occupier just as

it fought against the Nazis and Soviets", accusing the EU of seeking to subordinate Poland as a "German state (Notes from Poland, 2021). Similarly, in 2022, Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro claimed that Germany was attempting to install a "colonial government" in Poland led by Donald Tusk, alleging that Berlin, via EU mechanisms, was using financial coercion to influence Polish politics (Notes from Poland, 2022).

Beyond ideological opposition, PiS employs pragmatic arguments to mobilise domestic support. The party contends that Poland is unfairly penalised within the EU for asserting its autonomy. Kaczyński has accused European officials of breaching treaty provisions by intervening in areas of exclusive national competence, notably judicial reform (Petrequin,2021). The suspension of post-pandemic recovery funds overrule-of-law concerns is framed as political blackmail aimed at altering domestic electoral dynamics.

This discursive strategy reinforces a key PiS narrative: that "the EU wants a weak Poland" and backs the opposition to achieve that aim (Babiński, 2022) u). In response, PiS leaders have advocated retaliatory measures and called for a fundamental reconfiguration of the EU into a "Europe of Nations"—a looser confederal arrangement prioritising sovereignty over supranationalism. Since Brexit, PiS has consistently argued that "only a community of sovereign nation-states will survive in Europe", rejecting the goal of "ever closer union" as untenable.

Thus, while PiS officially maintains that Poland should remain within the EU, it insists on membership terms that do not constrain national autonomy or mandate liberal social reforms. This ambivalent stance—declaring "there will be no Polexit" while condemning the "dictatorship of Brussels bureaucracy" (BBC News, 2021)—reflects the party's attempt to balance a sovereigntist agenda with Poland's broadly pro-European public opinion.

Ruralism, understood as the valorisation and defence of rural communities, constitutes a central ideological pillar of PiS's political identity. The countryside is portrayed as the cultural heart of the Polish nation, embodying traditional values rooted in Catholicism, the family, and intergenerational continuity. This vision positions rural areas as the moral counterweight to the liberal cosmopolitanism associated with urban elites, particularly those affiliated with PO. Within this framework, PiS casts itself as the guardian of "real Poland"—a rural Poland seeking

compensatory justice for regions neglected by post-communist modernisation (Folvarčný and Kopeček, 2020).

Since its inception, PiS has prioritised rebalancing development between urban and rural regions. In its 2001 founding manifesto, the party pledged to "equalise living standards and development between cities and the countryside" (PiS, 2001). This goal was institutionalised in the 2014 Agricultural Programme, which reaffirmed Poland's rural identity and designated agriculture as a strategic economic sector. This focus is electorally strategic, as a significant portion of the Polish workforce remains employed in agriculture, and PiS's electoral base is concentrated in the rural, socially conservative east and south-east (Folvarčný and Kopeček, 2020).

Typical PiS voter resides in rural areas or small towns, is older, religious, and possesses lower levels of formal education. The party's most loyal constituencies are situated in agrarian regions of south-eastern Poland. These areas—defined by limited urbanisation, entrenched Catholic traditions, and economic underdevelopment—have provided fertile ground for PiS's anti-elitist and populist messaging. The party appeals to communities who feel that the benefits of democratic transition "never reached their villages", portraying itself as the authentic representative of ordinary citizens in opposition to urban elites accused of ignoring rural concerns (Folvarčný and Kopeček, 2020).

However, PiS's ruralism is not merely symbolic or cultural; it is also expressed through a concrete economic agenda of protectionism and redistribution aimed at rural constituencies. Throughout its time in office, the party has implemented targeted measures to support farmers and rural communities, reinforcing its narrative that "no one looks after the countryside like we do". These measures include the 2014 Agricultural Programme, tax exemptions on agricultural fuel (commonly referred to as "green diesel"), and strong opposition to the sale of agricultural land to foreign buyers, on the grounds of protecting national resources. Additionally, PiS has sought to increase EU agricultural subsidies and promoted direct financial assistance to small-scale frame.

This policy package exemplifies how PiS legitimises a form of rural economic protectionism, arguing for the need to shield the countryside from the disruptive effects of modernisation and international market pressures. A notable example of this approach occurred in 2023, when the PiS-led government unilaterally banned

the import of Ukrainian grain in an effort to stabilise domestic prices—despite the diplomatic fallout with both Kyiv and Brussels (Politico, 2023)

For PiS, the rural realm functions simultaneously as a bastion of tradition and a crucial source of political legitimacy. The countryside is portrayed as embodying a conservative social order that must be preserved amidst rapid societal transformation. In the party's rhetoric, rural life is inextricably linked to religious faith, extended family structures, and historical continuity—qualities framed as defining the essence of Polish nationhood.

Regarding climate change and environmental policy, PiS adopts a position marked by deep scepticism towards green initiatives promoted by the European Union and a strong emphasis on national energy sovereignty. While the party does not explicitly deny the existence of climate change, it consistently downplays its urgency and opposes environmental measures it perceives as detrimental to employment, industrial competitiveness, or national autonomy.

During its time in government, PiS pursued an energy strategy centred on coal as a primary resource, justifying its continued use on grounds of national security and energy independence. This approach led to frequent tensions with EU institutions. At the 2018 United Nations Climate Conference held in Katowice, President Andrzej Duda declared that Poland had "200 years of coal" and "no intention" of giving it up. Statements of this nature reinforce the party's narrative that decarbonisation is a secondary concern, subordinated to the imperatives of economic welfare and sovereign control over energy policy (Roberts Reza, 2018)

PiS rhetoric frequently frames EU climate policy as an externally imposed burden, incompatible with Poland's economic structure. In 2021, party leader Jarosław Kaczyński described the "Fit for 55" package as a form of "green communism", portraying it as an ideological experiment dictated by wealthier Western states (Krzysztoszek, 2023). Within this narrative, the EU's environmental agenda is not only seen as misaligned with Poland's interests but also as a direct challenge to national sovereignty.

This ideological rejection is complemented by the glorification of energy nationalism. In PiS's discourse, coal is elevated beyond its material value to become a symbol of self-sufficiency and resilience. Although successive PiS governments formally committed to phasing out coal by 2049, in practice they obstructed the

development of renewable energy sources and emphasised Poland's right to define its own pace and strategy for the energy transition (Euroactive, 2020)

Beyond ideological resistance, PiS has also deployed economic arguments to justify its cautious approach to climate policy. As energy prices surged across Europe, the party attributed the increase to EU regulatory mechanisms. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, for instance, directly blamed the European Union's Emissions Trading System (ETS) for rising electricity costs, asserting that it was "responsible for at least half the cost of energy in Poland" (Politico,2022).

5.2.1 Empirical evidence from CHES (2002-2024)

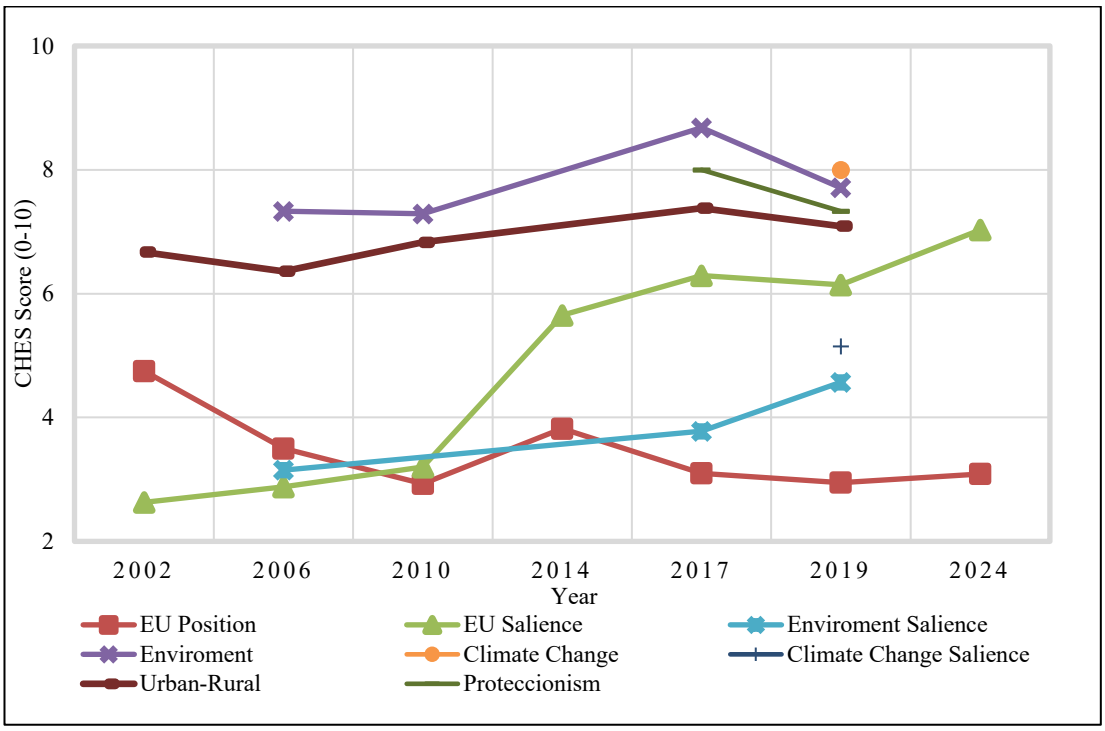
table 16. PiS´s EU position, environmental and climate attitudes, and ruralism

Year	European Position		Environment Position				Ruralism	
	EU Position	EU Salience	Environment	Environmental Salience	Climate Change	Climate Change Salience	Urban-rural	Protectionism
2002	4.75	2.63	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a.	n/a	n/a
2006	3.5	2.88	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a.	6.67	n/a
2010	2.93	3.2	7.33	3.15	n/a	n/a	6.36	n/a
2014	3.82	5.65	7.29	n/a	n/a	n/a	6.83	n/a
2017	3.10	6.29	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2019	2.95	6.14	8.68	3.78	n/a	n/a	7.38	8.00
2024	3.09	7.03	7.71	4.57	8.00	5.15	7.09	7.33

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: EU position is measured on a 1–7 scale (1 = strongly pro-EU, 7 = strongly anti-EU). All other items are 0–10. Higher values on Environment and Climate-change policies indicate prioritising economic growth over environmental/climate protection; higher values on Urban–rural indicate stronger emphasis on rural interests; higher values on Protectionism indicate more protectionist stances. Values reported as n/a were not available for that year.

Figure 12. Evolution of PiS´s EU position, environmental and climate attitudes, and ruralism (2002-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 16 and Figure 12 present longitudinal data on EU sovereignty, environmental positioning, and ruralism in PiS's ideology, based on expert assessments from the CHES for 2002–2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al.,2024). The data provide robust evidence of the persistence—and, in key domains, the intensification—of these pillars within the party's ideology.

Between 2002 and 2024, PiS evolved from a moderately pro-integration stance to a consolidated Eurosceptic position, while simultaneously elevating the salience of the European Union within its agenda. In 2002, the party registered a European position of 4.75, reflecting a centrist and cautiously pro-European orientation in the immediate aftermath of Poland's accession. By 2006, however, PiS had shifted decisively into the anti-integration camp (≤ 3.5) and thereafter remained at consistently sceptical levels: 2.93 (2010), 3.82 (2014), 3.10 (2017), 2.95 (2019), and 3.09 (2024) In parallel, EU salience rose steadily, moving from 2.63 in 2002 and 2.88 in 2006 to 3.20 in 2010, before sharply increasing to 5.65 in 2014 and peaking at 6.29 in 2017. Although remaining relatively high, it stabilised at 6.14 in 2019 and further increased to 7.03 in 2024, underscoring the centrality of European

issues within the party's agenda. These values demonstrate that the EU has become a durable and highly salient cleavage in PiS's political strategy. This configuration—persistent Euroscepticism coupled with sustained attention to EU issues—corroborates qualitative evidence portraying Brussels as an ideologically assertive authority. Rather than moderating during its time in office, PiS has normalised a sovereignty-based cleavage in which supranational actors are consistently framed as constraints on national prerogatives.

Environmental indicators reveal a growth-first profile that hardens through the 2010s and only partially eases by 2024. The environment item (0–10, higher values prioritising growth over environmental protection) is high in 2010 (7.33) and 2014 (7.29), climbs further to 8.68 (2019), and then declines to 6.96 (2024)—still firmly on the growth-prioritising side of the scale. Environmental salience remains modest in 2010 (3.15) and 2019 (3.78) but jumps to 9.00 in 2024, signalling that environmental policy has become a major arena of contestation. On climate specifically (available in 2024), the climate change item registers 9.00, while climate change salience records a lower value of 4.43. Taken together, these shifts corroborate the qualitative trajectory: "climate" is downplayed as a scientific question and recast as a distributional and sovereignty conflict—balancing costs to key domestic sectors and the imperative of national energy control against externally imposed constraints.

Ruralism is clearly consolidated by 2024. The urban–rural item registers 7.38 (2019) and 7.57 (2024), while protectionism remains elevated across the series—6.67 (2006), 6.36 (2010), 6.83 (2014)—peaking at 8.00 (2019) before settling at 6.88 (2024). These levels indicate a pronounced countryside-centred and producer-oriented stance, consistent with the qualitative analysis of PiS's valorisation of "real Poland", its defence of rural interests and traditions, and a policy repertoire privileging agricultural constituencies and domestic producers.

In conclusion, the CHES evidence demonstrates the entrenchment—and, at critical junctures, the intensification—of PiS's sovereignty, growth-first environmental, and ruralist pillars over 2006–2024. Rather than signalling moderation, the sequence is characterised by issue intensification and strategic reframing: sovereignty conflicts with the EU remain central; environmental preferences harden decisively towards growth-first positions even as "climate" receives selective

salience; and a ruralist/protectionist profile is consistently articulated. Consistent with the qualitative section, these pillars function less as autonomous agendas than as vehicles reinforcing a broader nationalist project, anchoring political identity in rural Poland while contesting supranational regulation.

5.3 National-conservative redistribution: the economic agenda of PiS

From an economic perspective, PiS has undergone a significant ideological evolution. While the party initially adhered to the principles of the social market economy, it gradually shifted towards a more interventionist and redistributive agenda, embedded within a broader national-conservative ideological framework. Since its return to power in 2015, PiS has sought to position itself as a defender of the economically marginalised, combining an ambitious welfare programme with a narrative centred on national sovereignty and social justice. This shift represented a clear rupture with the liberal economic consensus that had dominated Polish politics since 1989, and a repoliticisation of socio-economic grievances through the prism of national identity.

Rather than emulating the neoliberal paradigm characteristic of earlier centre-right formations, PiS articulates a conception of the state as a guarantor of dignity, economic security, and cultural continuity. This orientation closely aligns with what Kitschelt and McGann (1995) term the second "winning formula": a strategic synthesis of economic protectionism, authoritarian values, and ethno-nationalist framing. Although PiS operates in a national context largely devoid of significant immigration flows, its welfare policies are nonetheless underpinned by a logic of national belonging, with redistributive measures implicitly directed towards the ethnically Polish population. In this regard, PiS advances a form of welfare chauvinism rooted in Catholic social doctrine and the purportedly betrayed legacy of the Solidarity movement—melding economic interventionism with cultural traditionalism in a mutually reinforcing manner.

5.3.1 From economic liberalism to welfare nationalism: the early years

In its formative years, the party sought to position itself as a moderate political force, placing particular emphasis on the rule of law and the fight against corruption. Economically, it adopted a relatively liberal centre-right orientation, albeit with a less radical approach to market liberalisation than its principal rival on the centre-right, PO. From the outset, PiS invoked the concept of the "social market economy", a model traditionally associated with Western European Christian democracy, as a key element of its economic discourse.

The party's pronounced anti-communist stance, which has characterised its identity since its inception, also permeated its socio-economic discourse. In its foundational documents, PiS underscored the enduring pathologies of the former communist regime—particularly corruption and political clientelism—which, in its narrative, had led to a chronic insufficiency of public resources. To address these deficiencies, the party proposed a series of measures aimed at improving financial efficiency and enhancing state transparency, including, notably, the publication of lists identifying individuals with outstanding tax debts.

Furthermore, the party's programme advocated for a significant expansion of the powers of the Public Prosecutor General, envisaged as a kind of universal representative of the state in judicial affairs, endowed with the authority to act as an enforcement agent in debt recovery proceedings. Such reforms were designed to substantially increase the scope and authority of state intervention.

While PiS consistently expressed support for private property, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the reduction of taxes for individuals and businesses, it simultaneously adopted a critical stance towards the banking sector, the stock market, and large corporations. In one of its early programme documents, the party asserted that "the stock market destabilises the economy more than it creates capital" (PiS 2001b). It consistently advocated for greater regulation of financial institutions and foreign investment, calling for the introduction of sector-specific taxes and the promotion of Polish-owned businesses.

The 2005 elections marked a decisive ideological shift for PiS in the realm of economic policy. The party adopted a socio-economic profile that was clearly distinct from that of its principal rival, PO. While PO advanced an overtly neoliberal agenda—including the introduction of a flat tax—PiS defended a more

interventionist role for the state and progressively intensified its social rhetoric throughout the campaign. Jarosław Kaczyński articulated a stark dichotomy between two competing visions of Poland: the "liberal Poland" embodied by PO, and the "solidary Poland" advocated by PiS. Under this slogan, the party appealed to a notion of national solidarity aimed at addressing the grievances of those negatively impacted by free-market reforms.

In practical terms, this ideological reorientation was reflected in a series of socially oriented electoral pledges. PiS committed to implementing policies designed to benefit the most disadvantaged sectors of society, explicitly rejected the flat tax proposal, and advocated for a proactive role of the state in correcting economic inequalities. Notably, Andrzej Lepper—the leader of the agrarian-populist party Samoobrona—endorsed Lech Kaczyński in the second round of the 2005 presidential elections. Lepper urged left-leaning voters to support Kaczyński as a means of blocking PO's neoliberal programme, while endorsing PiS's proposals to increase social spending, reduce unemployment, and reinforce the state's presence in the economy.

This ideological repositioning enabled PiS to attract segments of the electorate that had traditionally supported left-wing parties, at a time when the conventional Polish left was experiencing a profound crisis. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, SLD—formerly the country's dominant political force—suffered a dramatic collapse, securing only 11% of the vote and losing almost all of its parliamentary influence. In the absence of a credible left-wing alternative, PiS effectively positioned itself as the principal advocate of social policies, filling the vacuum left by the discredited social-democratic tradition.

Following its electoral victory in 2005, PiS formed a governing coalition with Samoobrona and the LPR and proceeded to implement several of the social and interventionist measures outlined in its programme. During the 2005–2007 legislative period, the PiS-led government committed itself to expanding social spending and enhancing the state's role in the economy. Notable initiatives included freezing or reversing several contentious privatisation processes, establishing parliamentary commissions to investigate the post-1989 sale of Polish banks to foreign capital, and scrutinising the central bank's role in these transactions.

Furthermore, the government introduced protectionist measures that were largely unprecedented in Poland's post-communist era. These included halting the construction of large foreign-owned supermarkets and prohibiting those already operating from opening on Sundays, citing the need to prevent monopolistic practices and to safeguard small domestic retailers.

In terms of fiscal policy, PiS opposed the introduction of a flat tax—an initiative championed by its former liberal coalition partners—and instead upheld a progressive taxation system, in line with its commitment to social justice. Many of these policies reflected the influence of PiS's coalition allies, particularly Samoobrona, which brought an agrarian, anti-liberal economic agenda into the government. Indeed, it can be argued that following Samoobrona's electoral collapse in 2007, PiS absorbed significant elements of its economic programme. After the political exit of Andrzej Lepper, PiS adopted several of Samoobrona's left-leaning economic positions—such as the defence of small-scale agriculture, support for subsidies, and the endorsement of state intervention—and reinterpreted them within its own national-conservative framework.

During its subsequent years in opposition—while PO pursued a more orthodox free-market agenda—PiS consolidated its image as a socially oriented political force. It sharply criticised the liberal economic reforms enacted by the ruling coalition, most notably the 2012 pension reform, which raised the retirement age to 67 (Polakowski & Hagemejer, 2023). PiS publicly vowed to reverse this measure upon returning to power. The party also condemned austerity policies and a new wave of privatisations, arguing that such measures disproportionately harmed "ordinary citizens" (Iron,2023)

The economic discourse of PiS during this period was shaped by its earlier governing experience, especially its collaboration with left-wing populist actors such as Samoobrona. Drawing upon this legacy, PiS fully embraced many demands typically associated with economic populism. As a result, the party positioned itself as a vocal critic of the post-1989 capitalist transformation, contending that Poland had "chosen the wrong path"—one that had primarily served the interests of a privileged minority.

In its official discourse and programme documents, PiS increasingly underscored the need to redress the "neoliberal excesses" of the post-communist transition. This

critique drew explicitly on Catholic social teaching and invoked the principle of solidarity. The party contended that the state could not abdicate its social responsibilities—particularly towards "the most vulnerable groups whose situation had worsened" as a result of economic liberalisation.

This rhetoric—strikingly reminiscent of traditional left-wing parties—resonated with a substantial segment of the Polish electorate, particularly in rural areas and smaller towns, where PiS gradually consolidated its political base. Paradoxically, a party rooted in conservative and nationalist values emerged as the principal voice of the "economically marginalised majority," advocating for a more equitable distribution of resources and for enhanced state protection against market forces. Although the defence of traditional values remained central to mobilising its core conservative electorate, it was PiS's promises of prosperity and social well-being that constituted the cornerstone of its broader electoral appeal. Notably, Jarosław Kaczyński began to employ a term that had previously been largely absent from the party's lexicon: the welfare state (*państwo dobrobytu*) (Bill & Stanley, 2020).

This discursive shift was formalised in PiS's 2019 electoral programme, pointedly titled *A Polish Model of the Welfare State* . In several campaign speeches, Kaczyński defined this model as a set of mechanisms designed to reduce social inequality, explicitly framed in opposition to the "social Darwinism" and individualism commonly associated with neoliberalism.

However, this welfare agenda was consistently articulated with an emphasis on its distinctly *Polish* character. Kaczyński stressed the need for a welfare system grounded in national values, thereby setting it apart from Western European social-democratic models, which might appear culturally or ideologically alien to many of PiS's conservative supporters. This careful balance—combining material redistribution with cultural traditionalism—proved instrumental in expanding the party's appeal beyond its traditional base (Bill & Stanley, 2020).

5.3.2 The national-conservative welfare turn and the consolidation of a redistributive agenda

Upon returning to power in 2015 PiS swiftly implemented an ambitious socio-economic programme that gave concrete form to its electoral promises. The party adopted economic policies commonly associated with European social democracy yet embedded within a broader national-conservative vision. One of the first measures taken by the PiS government was the reversal of the pension reform enacted by the previous administration. In November 2016, the Polish Parliament approved a return to the former retirement age — 65 for men and 60 for women — thereby repealing the 2012 reform that had gradually raised the retirement threshold to 67. Then Prime Minister Beata Szydło described the reform as an act of "social justice" for workers (President of the Republic of Poland, 2016).

In parallel, the government introduced a series of increases to minimum pensions and additional payments for retirees. In 2017, the minimum pension was raised by 13%, from 882.56 zł to 1,000 zł per month, benefitting approximately 1.5 million pensioners. Beginning in 2019, the government introduced an annual bonus payment for retirees — the so-called "13th pension" — equivalent to the minimum pension and distributed each spring (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2023). In 2021, this was further complemented by the introduction of a "14th pension" for low-income pensioners, which was made permanent as of 2022 (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2023). As a result of these initiatives, the effective minimum pension increased by approximately 700 zł between 2015 and 2023, rising from around 888 zł in 2015 to 1,588 zł in 2023.

At the same time, the PiS government pursued a policy of sustained and significant increases to the national minimum wage, raising it annually and consistently above the rate of inflation— from 1,750 zł in 2015 to 3,600 zł in 2023, effectively more than doubling in eight years. The minimum hourly wage rose proportionally, from 13 zł/h in 2017 to approximately 22.80 zł/h in 2023, in line with the monthly increases. This policy of rapid wage growth formed part of PiS's so-called "dignity policy" (*polityka godności*), aimed at improving living standards and curbing labour emigration (Wlodarczak-Semczuk,2023).

Perhaps the most emblematic policy of the PiS welfare turn was the *Family 500+* programme, launched in 2016. This universal child benefit initially provided a

monthly allowance of 500 złoty per child starting from the second child and was later extended to cover the first. The programme represented a substantial transfer of resources to working families, often equivalent to a 20–40 per cent increase in income for low-income households. Its impact was both immediate and considerable: extreme child poverty declined by approximately one-third within a single year. The political and social success of *500+* not only consolidated PiS's popularity but also demonstrated the party's commitment to positioning family welfare as a central pillar of its socio-economic agenda (Owczarczyk, 2021).

PiS framed its shift towards redistribution as a means of breaking the hegemonic "monopower" that, in its view, had characterised Poland's post-1989 political order. According to the party's narrative, all major political forces — both post-Solidarity and post-communist — had acted in concert against the interests of the nation and of "ordinary Poles" in the economic domain. These elites were accused of having sold off the "crown jewels" of the national economy to foreign actors, of having transformed the country into a "colonised" reservoir of cheap labour for external exploitation, and of having overseen an unjust transformation from which the majority of citizens failed to benefit (Bill & Stanley, 2020).

In contrast, PiS emphasised the need to protect national capital, promote social equality, and ensure balanced development across all regions of the country. The success and popularity of its social programmes — facilitated by favourable macroeconomic conditions — significantly shifted the political and economic agenda. By the time of the 2023 elections, all major parties, including those traditionally associated with market-oriented economic liberalism, such as the liberal-centrist coalition of PO and Nowoczesna, had incorporated proposals for increased social spending into their electoral platforms (Bill & Stanley, 2020).

Although PiS presented its so-called "good change" agenda (dobra zmiana) as a revolutionary break with the past, its approach was not entirely unprecedented within the Polish context. Earlier governments led by the post-communist SLD during the periods 1993–1997 and 2001–2005 had similarly claimed to mitigate the impact of economic liberalisation. For instance, they slowed the pace of privatisation — especially during the first term — in an attempt to cushion the social consequences of the transition. However, these governments ultimately became discredited due to corruption scandals and their association with the remnants of

the communist past. As a result, the political space traditionally occupied by a moderate and credible left had all but disappeared.

PiS was able to fill this vacuum by channelling the discontent of broad social sectors who perceived themselves as the losers of the post-communist transition. From this perspective, PiS's rise to power in 2015 can be interpreted as part of a broader pattern of alternation in Poland's post-1989 political landscape, marked by periodic oscillations between governments with more or less liberal economic orientations. Just as the SLD had twice replaced post-Solidarity governments perceived as more reformist, PiS succeeded two consecutive terms of the economically liberal PO with a more state-centred approach (Bill & Stanley, 2020).

Nonetheless, the PiS programme constitutes a genuinely novel development and a radicalisation of this pattern. Previous governments had limited fiscal capacity to implement large-scale redistributive measures. By contrast, PiS introduced substantial cash transfer programmes unprecedented in scale, generating a sense of empowerment among many voters who had never experienced such direct state support under previous administrations (Gdula, 2017; Sadura & Sierakowski, 2019).

5.3.3 Dignity, identity, and redistribution: welfare chauvinism

Within the framework of the "winning formula" proposed by Kitschelt and McGann (1995), the electoral success of PiS cannot be explained solely by reference to its redistributive economic agenda. Rather, it derives from a strategic synthesis of economic interventionism and cultural conservatism. In a society where the majority of the population resides outside major urban centres—areas that have disproportionately benefitted from post-1989 economic growth and are generally more receptive to progressive values—this dual strategy has enabled PiS to forge a strong connection with the average voter (Badora, 2015).

This approach has allowed the party to respond effectively to deeply rooted grievances associated with the perceived injustices of the post-communist transition—a process that David Ost (2005) famously characterised as the "defeat of Solidarity". According to Ost, the emergence of a broad neoliberal consensus in Warsaw eliminated any viable political avenue through which to articulate economic discontent. The mainstream political parties converged around a shared

agenda of privatisation, deregulation, and the marginalisation of organised labour, thus contributing to heightened inequality, social insecurity, and poverty.

In the absence of class-based mobilisation, economic frustrations were increasingly expressed through non-economic channels—particularly through exclusionary narratives rooted in national identity, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. As Ost (2005) argues, the ascendancy of the Polish right—including radical right forces—in the early 2000s may be interpreted as a form of "political capture," in which structurally induced economic discontent was rearticulated within culturally coded frames. In this sense, material hardship came to be narrated—and politically mobilised—through identity-based discourses.

Since returning to office in 2015, PiS has managed to repoliticise economic issues while simultaneously reinforcing these culturally resonant narratives. Crucially, the economic and cultural dimensions of the party's discourse are not in tension, but rather function symbiotically. PiS regularly invokes the "betrayed legacy" of the Solidarity movement—not only in defence of national identity, but also as a moral justification for its vision of social solidarity. This dual invocation allows the party to present itself as the legitimate heir to a tradition that combines patriotism with social justice.

Nonetheless, PiS's repoliticisation of the economic sphere remains cautious and ideologically selective. The party generally avoids left-wing terminology or explicit references to class, structural inequality, or redistribution in Marxist terms. However, its economic strategy implicitly constructs a cleavage between a disadvantaged, lower-income, less-educated and non-urban population, and the liberal, urban, highly educated elites who are perceived as the main beneficiaries of the post-transition order. This underlying socio-political divide is clearly observable in the electoral geography of PiS support during the 2019–2023 period, which reveals a consistent pattern of dominance in rural areas and post-industrial regions.

Perhaps most significantly, PiS's project has encompassed not only the redistribution of material resources but also what some analysts have described as a symbolic "redistribution of dignity" or social recognition (Bill & Stanley, 2020). This symbolic dimension has been central to the party's efforts to politically empower social groups who have long felt marginalised or invisible under the

hegemonic neoliberal paradigm. Through this approach, PiS has successfully undermined the previously uncontested dominance of neoliberal orthodoxy in Polish political discourse. However, this shift has come at the cost of consolidating a new form of welfare chauvinism—combining economic protectionism with cultural exclusion and anti-pluralism—thereby reconfiguring, rather than dismantling, existing hierarchies of recognition.

5.3.4 Empirical evidence from CHES (2002-2024)

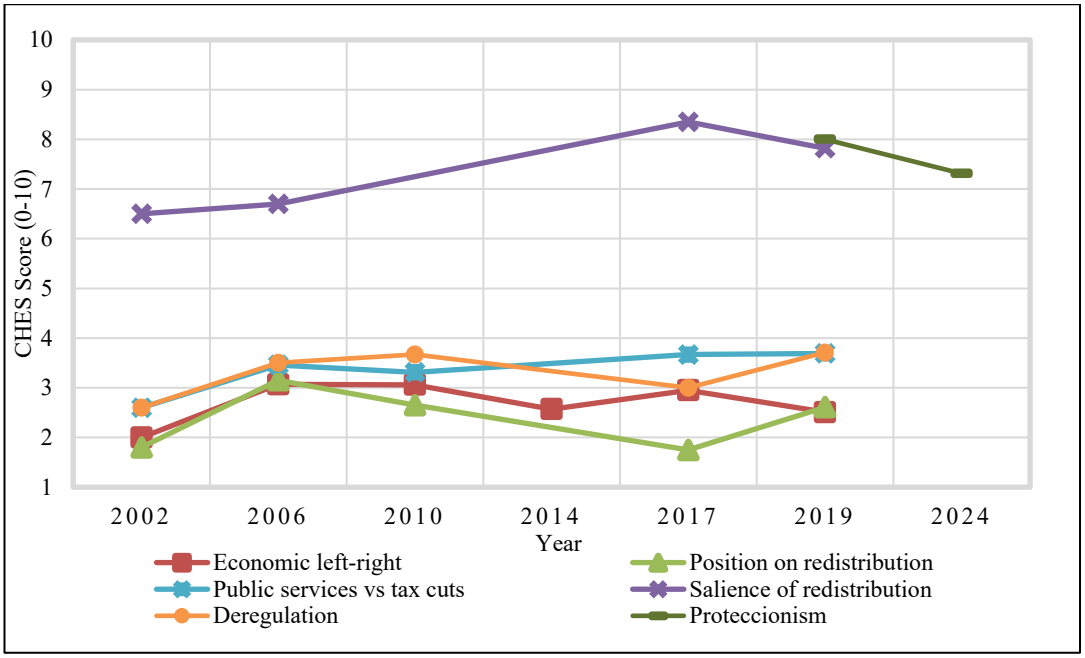
Table 17. PiS´s economic positioning (2002-2024)

Year	Economic left-right	Position on redistribution	Salience of redistribution	Public services vs tax cuts	Deregulation	Protectionism
2002	4.63	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2006	2.00	1.80	6.50	2.60	2.60	n/a
2010	3.07	3.15	6.70	3.46	3.50	n/a
2014	3.06	2.65	n/a	3.31	3.67	n/a
2017	2.57	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2019	2.95	1.75	8.35	3.67	3.00	8.00
2024	2.51	2.61	7.82	3.69	3.71	7.31

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All variables are measured on a 0–10 scale, with higher values indicating more market-liberal, fiscally conservative or protectionist positions. Scores represent mean expert assessments from the CHES.

Figure 13. Evolution of PiS´s position on economy (2019-2024)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2022) and Rovny et al. (2024).

Table 17 and Figure 13 present longitudinal data on PiS's economic positioning, based on expert assessments from the CHES between 2002 and 2024 (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al.,2024). The evidence corroborates the qualitative analysis developed in the previous sections, illustrating the party's gradual departure from a relatively liberal orientation towards a more redistributive and interventionist profile embedded within its national-conservative framework.

On the economic left–right scale, PiS has shifted consistently leftward over the past two decades. From a relatively centrist position in 2002 (4.63), the party was assessed firmly on the left by 2006 (2.00) and has since oscillated within a narrow band between 2.00 and 3.07. In 2024, PiS is located at 2.51, underscoring its enduring commitment to state interventionism and its rupture with the liberal economic orthodoxy that had dominated Polish politics since 1989. This trajectory reflects the consolidation of PiS as a conservative force that combines cultural traditionalism with socio-economic redistribution.

The CHES indicators on redistribution reinforce this interpretation. Since 2006, the party has consistently been placed at the interventionist pole: 1.80 in 2006, 3.15 in 2010, 2.65 in 2014, 1.75 in 2019, and 2.61 in 2024. These values point to a persistent orientation towards redistribution and the expansion of state transfers,

consistent with flagship initiatives such as Family 500+ and the introduction of the 13th and 14th pensions.

The salience of redistribution has also been consistently high, peaking at 8.35 in 2019 and remaining elevated in 2024 (7.82). This suggests not only the programmatic weight PiS attaches to welfare expansion but also its centrality in the party's political strategy: redistribution has been instrumentalised to consolidate electoral support, particularly among rural and lower-income constituencies.

On the dimension contrasting public services and tax cuts, PiS has consistently leaned towards expanding welfare provision over reducing the tax burden. Its scores range from 2.60 in 2006 to 3.69 in 2024, confirming its preference for strengthening the role of the state as provider and guarantor of social security.

With regard to deregulation, the party has been placed systematically against liberalisation. Its position has remained interventionist, ranging from 2.60 (2006) to 3.71 (2024). This reflects PiS's long-standing critique of financial institutions, foreign capital, and privatisation processes, as well as its emphasis on regulating strategic sectors in line with national interests.

Finally, the CHES data capture PiS's pronounced orientation towards protectionism, particularly in recent years. The party scored 8.00 in 2019 and 7.31 in 2024, reflecting its commitment to economic nationalism. These positions are consistent with PiS's discourse on safeguarding Polish capital, limiting foreign ownership in strategic sectors, and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises.

Taken together, the CHES indicators substantiate the qualitative evidence that PiS has undergone a significant ideological transformation: from a centre-right party invoking the "social market economy" to a national-conservative force championing welfare expansion, protectionism, and state intervention. In this sense, PiS breaks with the tradition of liberal conservatism in Poland, represented by formations such as PO, by adopting positions historically more closely associated with social democracy, particularly in the domains of redistribution and social services. Crucially, this shift has been facilitated by the structural weakness of the left in Poland, which created a political and programmatic vacuum in the space of social protection and welfare provision. Unlike earlier periods dominated by liberal or neoliberal orthodoxy, PiS has normalised redistribution and welfare chauvinism

as central pillars of its economic project, thereby reshaping the contours of economic debate in Poland.

5.4 Summary and implications

This chapter has examined the ideological configuration of PiS as the Polish representative of the PRR, drawing on programmatic evidence, discursive analysis, and empirical data from the CHES (Jolly et al. 2022, 2024). The findings demonstrate that PiS embodies the three core features of the PRR—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—while simultaneously integrating additional ideological pillars that reflect Poland's post-communist trajectory and historical legacies.

The CHES data confirm the consolidation and intensification of nativism within PiS's ideological profile. The party consistently registers high scores on immigration restriction, nationalism, anti-multiculturalism, and anti-Islam rhetoric, particularly from 2015 onward. These values are mirrored in its discursive and policy agenda, which frames Poland as an ethnically homogeneous and Christian nation, threatened by multiculturalism, liberal cosmopolitanism, and Muslim migration. However, PiS's approach to Ukrainian refugees reveals a racialised hierarchy of inclusion, whereby solidarity is extended to groups framed as culturally proximate while non-European migrants are portrayed as existential threats. This selective ethnonationalism underscores PiS's positioning as a paradigmatic nativist actor within the PRR.

Similarly, the authoritarian dimension emerges as a defining pillar of the party's identity. The empirical indicators point to a sustained emphasis on law and order, traditional values, and state-centred authority, alongside systematic opposition to civil liberties, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ rights. These tendencies are borne out in PiS's institutional reforms—particularly its attacks on judicial independence and media pluralism—as well as in its cultural agenda, which instrumentalises Catholic values to justify censorship, ideological education, and the repression of dissent. The convergence of religious traditionalism and executive centralisation positions PiS as a textbook case of democratic backsliding within the PRR family.

Populism, in contrast, plays a more ambivalent yet still integral role. CHES indicators show that while anti-elite salience remains high, the party's explicit "people versus elite" rhetoric has moderated since it assumed office. Rather than

constructing a popular subject in majoritarian terms, PiS embeds its populism within a broader nationalist-conservative framework. Its discourse constructs the Third Republic as a façade of democracy dominated by post-communist and liberal elites, while presenting PiS as the authentic representative of "ordinary Poles" betrayed by systemic transformation. This hybrid configuration—fusing populist anti-elitism with nation-centric appeals—reflects the strategic recalibration of populism under conditions of incumbency.

Beyond the core PRR features, PiS articulates a number of complementary ideological pillars that further define its distinctiveness. Its hard Euroscepticism, moral ruralism, and climate scepticism illustrate a broader sovereigntist agenda that frames the European Union as a liberal, interventionist threat to Poland's identity and autonomy. PiS's valorisation of the countryside, its defence of coal and energy sovereignty, and its opposition to EU environmental standards reinforce its image as the defender of "real Poland" against supranational elites and globalist impositions. These elements enable the party to mobilise cultural and territorial grievances, particularly in rural and post-industrial regions, thereby enhancing its electoral appeal and ideological coherence.

Economically, PiS has undergone a notable transformation from early market liberalism to a robust programme of welfare nationalism. Consistent with Kitschelt and McGann's (1995) "second winning formula", the party combines economic interventionism with social conservatism and nativist exclusion. CHES data confirm this shift: PiS scores strongly on redistribution, protectionism, and resistance to deregulation, distinguishing itself from both its liberal predecessors and from more economically orthodox PRR parties in Western Europe. Its hallmark programmes—Family 500+, the 13th and 14th pensions, and minimum wage increases—exemplify a strategic synthesis of material redistribution and symbolic recognition aimed at economically and culturally marginalised voters. However, this economic agenda is also exclusionary, prioritising ethnically Polish constituencies and reinforcing hierarchies of cultural belonging.

Taken together, the evidence presented in this chapter supports the argument that PiS represents a fully consolidated variant of the PRR in Central and Eastern Europe. It exemplifies the authoritarian–interventionist model, marked by state-led redistribution, illiberal governance, and cultural nationalism. At the same time, the

Polish case reveals a number of specificities: its anchoring in post-Solidarity anti-communism, its strategic alliance with the Catholic Church, and its synthesis of populist and conservative frames. These dynamics reflect the party's adaptation of the PRR model to the post-1989 Polish context—where democratic norms remain contested, economic grievances persist, and national identity is shaped by a complex interplay of historical trauma, religious tradition, and geopolitical anxiety.

In this sense, PiS is both emblematic and exceptional: emblematic in its articulation of the core features of the PRR, and exceptional in its synthesis of authoritarian governance, national–Catholic traditionalism, and economic redistribution. Understanding this configuration is essential for situating the Polish case within the comparative study of the European PRR, and for grasping the evolving forms of illiberal politics in post-communist democracies.

Chapter 6. Vox and PiS within the European PRR

This chapter shifts the analytical focus from the individual case studies of Vox and PiS to their positioning within the broader party family of the European PRR. Building upon the ideological and discursive analyses developed in Chapters 4 and 5, it situates both parties within the wider PRR landscape, while taking into account their respective national contexts and historical legacies.

The chapter is structured in two main sections. The first section draws on data from the CHES (Jolly et al. 2022, 2024), to identify the principal PRR parties across Europe and to provide a comparative overview of their electoral strength and ideological positioning across four key dimensions: nativism, authoritarianism, populism, and the economic left–right spectrum. This mapping exercise highlights the internal heterogeneity of the PRR party family and employs visual tools—such as bubble charts and scatter plots—to illustrate intra-family variation. It also incorporates Kitschelt and McGann's (1995) "winning formula" framework to explore regional patterns and ideological clustering, thereby offering insights into the geographical variation within the European PRR.

The second section builds upon this comparative framework to locate Vox and PiS within the wider constellation of PRR parties. It identifies the formations with which they share the highest levels of ideological affinity—based on the aforementioned dimensions—and examines the extent to which their profiles converge or diverge. The analysis seeks to determine their closest analogues within the party family, thus shedding light on their relative distinctiveness or typicality.

In doing so, the chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the PRR as a heterogeneous yet structurally coherent party family. It positions Vox and PiS as contextually distinct but analytically comparable actors whose trajectories exemplify the diverse manifestations of contemporary radical right populism in Europe.

6.1 Mapping the ideological, economic, and institutional diversity of the European PRR

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the emergence, rise, institutionalisation, and subsequent normalisation of the PRR in Europe constitute an incontrovertible empirical reality. With the exception of Ireland, Luxembourg, and Malta—currently the only EU member states without PRR representation at the national level—these parties have secured parliamentary representation across the continent. In numerous cases, they have surpassed the 20–25 per cent vote share and become key actors in national politics. In countries such as Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, and the Czech Republic, PRR parties now govern either as senior coalition partners or as leading parties in government. Similar dynamics are observed in Sweden, where the Sweden Democrats emerged as the second-largest party and currently support the governing coalition, and in Finland, where the Finns Party achieved a comparable result and joined the government.

Notably, the Iberian Peninsula—long regarded as an exception to the European PRR trend—has also witnessed the end of this so-called 'Iberian exceptionalism'. In Spain, Vox entered the national parliament in 2019 and has since consolidated its position as the third-largest political force. In Portugal, Chega achieved a breakthrough in the 2022 legislative elections and became the second-largest party following the 2025 general election, thus confirming the PRR's consolidation in Southern Europe.

A likewise noteworthy case is Germany. Although PRR parties have not entered the federal government, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has firmly established itself as the country's second political force, overtaking the Social Democrats of Chancellor Olaf Scholz in the 2024 European elections. Even more striking, the AfD secured unprecedented victories in regional elections in the east. In September 2024, the party won its first-ever regional election in Thuringia, obtaining over 30% of the vote—a landmark moment, marking the first time a far-right party had won a German state election since the Second World War.

The 2024 European Parliament elections marked a critical juncture for the PRR at the supranational level. Across the 27 EU member states, PRR parties collectively secured nearly 25 per cent of the popular vote, translating into more than 200 out of 720 seats. Hypothetically, if these parties were to form a unified parliamentary

group, they would surpass the European People's Party (EPP)—currently the largest group, with 188 seats—and emerge as the dominant bloc in the European Parliament.

The electoral trajectory of the PRR over the past few decades has been striking. In 1985, radical right parties collectively obtained a mere 4 per cent of the vote across Europe. By the early 2000s, their support had doubled to approximately 10 per cent. During the 2010s, this growth accelerated considerably, as many PRR parties experienced breakthrough moments, often capitalising on exogenous shocks such as the global financial crisis, the refugee crisis, and growing disillusionment with mainstream political actors. By the 2020s, as previously noted, PRR parties had become the largest political force in six European countries (France, Italy, Hungary, Austria, Belgium, and Slovenia) and the second-largest in another six (Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia).

This trajectory reflects a gradual but steady process of normalisation that has unfolded since the late 1980s. Increasingly, PRR parties are viewed as koalitionsfähig (viable coalition partners)—not only by mainstream centre-right parties but, in some instances, also by factions of the centre-left. In parallel, PRR ideas have progressively permeated the political mainstream, as major parties have adopted elements of their discourse and policy agendas—albeit in moderated and strategic forms—to maintain electoral competitiveness (Mudde, 2021).

Despite their growing institutional entrenchment and ideological diffusion, internal heterogeneity remains a defining feature of the PRR. As illustrated in Table 18, this party family comprises 45 formations across Europe, each exhibiting distinct electoral trajectories, programmatic profiles, and ideological orientation.

Table 18. Electoral strength and ideological profiles of PRR in Europe

Party	Country	National Election Vote (%)	European Election Vote (%)	Nativism	Authoritarianism	Populism	Economy
VB	BE	13.77	14.50	9.62	6.93	6.96	7.00
DPP	DK	2.63	6.37	9.09	5.68	4.87	5.55
NB	DK	3.66	–	8.99	5.63	5.32	7.91
DD	DK	8.08	7.39	8.50	5.07	5.62	6.73
AfD	DE	20.80	15.89	9.78	7.61	7.19	7.63
EL	GR	4.45	9.30	9.20	9.07	8.11	6.50
FL	GR	0.43	3.04	9.39	9.37	5.28	8.00
Spartans	GR	4.46	–	9.46	9.10	7.58	5.17
Vox	ES	12.38	9.60	9.40	8.63	6.35	9.00
SALF	ES	n/a	2.37	8.89	7.89	7.63	8.43
RN	FR	37.06	31.37	9.71	6.79	5.92	6.00
REC	FR	0.75	5.47	9.81	8.68	5.64	8.33
Lega	IT	8.78	9.00	9.37	8.31	5.60	6.80
FDI	IT	25.98	28.80	9.19	8.36	5.43	6.40
PVV	NL	23.49	16.97	9.03	6.88	5.66	6.33
FvD	NL	2.23	2.49	9.01	8.22	5.99	8.80
Reform UK	UK	14.30	–	9.06	7.63	7.32	8.39
Chega	PT	22.60	9.80	9.15	8.91	7.92	8.09
FPÖ	AT	28.85	25.36	9.60	8.52	7.92	6.58
PS (Finns)	FI	20.10	7.60	9.20	7.96	6.79	8.18
SD	SE	20.50	13.17	9.65	6.57	5.26	6.32
Vazrazhdane	BG	12.92	13.98	8.63	8.79	7.88	3.84
MECh	BG	4.44	2.54	7.12	7.79	8.37	4.13
Velichie	BG	3.87	4.07	7.37	8.13	8.49	4.24
SPD	CZ	9.56	5.73	9.49	8.20	7.69	4.10
MOTO	CZ	0.97	10.26	8.46	7.43	7.17	7.42
EKRE	EE	16.05	14.90	8.50	8.81	8.06	5.84
Fidesz-KDNP	HU	34.33	44.82	7.68	9.20	3.64	3.71
Jobbik	HU	6.47	0.99	5.31	6.93	5.87	4.71
MHM	HU	5.88	6.71	7.74	9.06	5.76	4.62

NA	LV	9.40	22.32	8.12	7.33	4.77	5.75
NS	LV	2.87	3.79	8.45	8.46	7.62	4.38
PiS	PL	35.40	36.20	8.28	8.56	5.89	2.52
Konfederacja	PL	7.20	12.10	9.21	8.73	7.84	9.21
AUR	RO	18.01	14.93	7.79	8.69	7.89	4.65
SOS RO	RO	7.36	5.03	7.96	8.81	8.20	3.76
POT	RO	6.46	–	8.33	9.11	8.61	4.22
SNS	SK	5.60	1.90	8.37	8.93	4.32	4.40
Republika	SK	4.75	12.53	8.98	9.27	5.80	5.05
Resni.ca	SI	2.86	3.97	7.42	7.10	7.75	7.70
DP	HR	9.56	8.84	8.13	9.00	6.43	6.30
FrP	NO	11.60	not EU member state	8.75	6.00	5.92	7.69
SVP/UDC	CH	27.93	not EU member state	9.01	8.21	6.48	8.33
MCG	CH	0.51	not EU member state	7.99	7.49	8.95	6.00
ELAM	CY	6.78	11.19	9.42	8.65	7.00	4.60

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

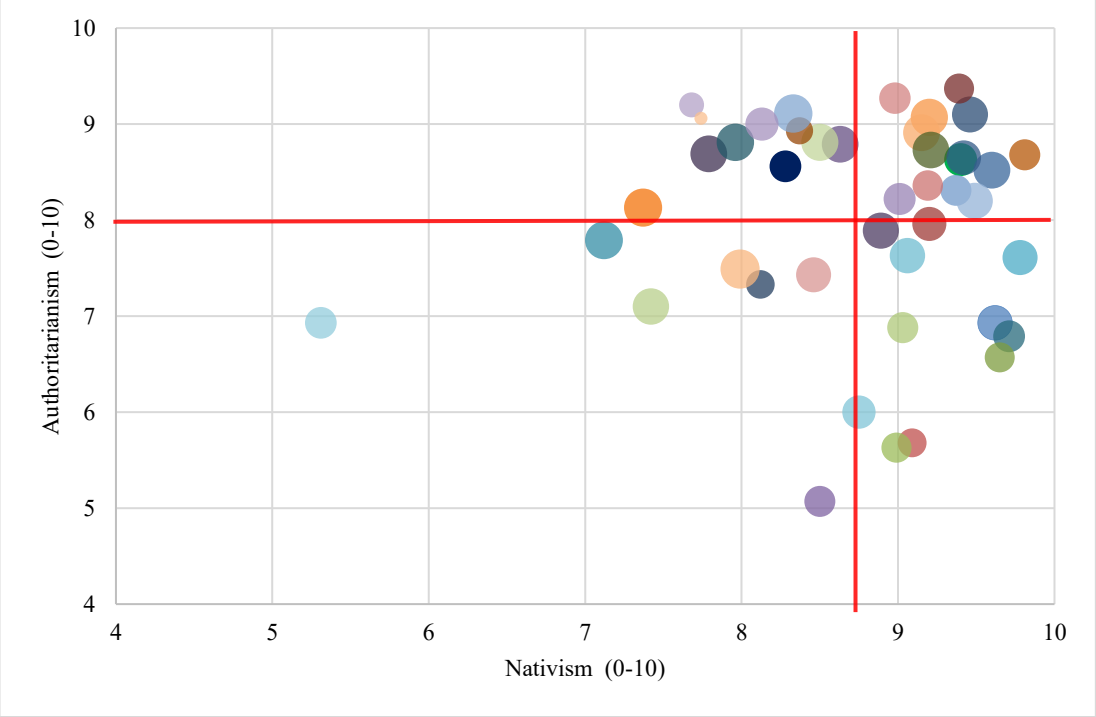
Notes:

1. Nativism, authoritarianism and populism represent aggregated indices, calculated as the mean of several variables in CHES (the same operationalisation as in Chapters 4 and 5). All are measured on a 0–10 scale.
2. The "Economy" variable corresponds to lrecon, which captures parties' stance on economic issues (privatisation, taxes, regulation, government spending, welfare state). Parties on the economic left (0) favour an active state, whereas those on the economic right (10) support a reduced state role.
3. National electoral results correspond to the most recent parliamentary elections held in each country.
4. SALF is a newly formed party in Spain (2024), hence no results in national elections.
5. Norway and Switzerland are not members of the European Union; consequently, they do not participate in European Parliament elections.

As emphasised throughout this study, not all parties within the PRR family are ideologically identical, despite sharing core traits such as nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. The PRR thus constitutes a heterogeneous ideological family, encompassing diverse political traditions, historical legacies, and discursive strategies shaped by specific national contexts.

To empirically assess this diversity, the ideological positioning of the 45 identified PRR parties has been systematically mapped. Drawing on the three core ideological components of the PRR—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—the parties' relative positions are visually represented in a two-dimensional scatterplot (Figure 15). In this figure, the horizontal axis denotes levels of nativism, while the vertical axis captures levels of authoritarianism. Bubble size reflects the intensity of populism.

figure 14. Ideological positioning of European PRR parties: nativism, authoritarianism and populism



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: The horizontal axis represents levels of nativism (0–10), while the vertical axis captures levels of authoritarianism (0–10). Bubble size indicates the degree of populism. The intersecting dashed lines correspond to the mean values of nativism (≈8.70) and authoritarianism (≈8.0), dividing the plot into four quadrants that illustrate different ideological profiles within the European PRR party family.

The upper-right quadrant—characterised by high levels of both nativism and authoritarianism—encompasses parties that represent the ideological hard core of the European PRR. These formations combine strongly exclusionary, ethno-nationalist worldviews with pronounced authoritarianism, particularly in matters related to law, order, morality, and national identity. This "hot zone" of the PRR includes the Greek parties Voice of Reason (FL, 9.39 / 9.37), Spartans (9.46 / 9.10), and Greek Solution (EL, 9.20 / 9.07); Vox in Spain (9.40 / 8.63); Éric Zemmour's French party Reconquête (REC, 9.81 / 8.68); the Italian parties Lega (9.37 / 8.31) and Brothers of Italy (FdI, 9.19 / 8.36); the Dutch Forum for Democracy (FvD, 9.01 / 8.22); the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ, 9.60 / 8.52); Chega in Portugal (9.15 / 8.91); the Cypriot National Popular Front (ELAM, 9.42 / 8.65); Freedom and Direct Democracy in the Czech Republic (SPD, 9.49 / 8.20); Konfederacja in Poland (9.21 / 8.73); Republika in Slovakia (8.98 / 9.27); and Switzerland's Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC, 9.01 / 8.21). This quadrant is predominantly populated by parties from Western and Mediterranean Europe, where anti-immigration stances, anti-Islamic rhetoric, and authoritarian moral conservatism converge to produce the most radicalised expressions of the PRR.

The upper-left quadrant—marked by slightly lower levels of nativism but similarly high levels of authoritarianism—is occupied by parties whose profiles are shaped less by extreme ethnic nationalism and more by authoritarianism rooted in religious conservatism, moral traditionalism, and a strong emphasis on sovereignty and order. Examples include Bulgarian Revival (8.63 / 8.79), Velichie (7.37 / 8.13), the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE, 8.50 / 8.81), the Slovak National Party (SNS, 8.37 / 8.93), the Romanian Party of Young People (POT, 8.33 / 9.11), PiS in Poland (PiS, 8.28 / 8.56), the Croatian Homeland Movement (DP, 8.13 / 9.00), the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR, 7.79 / 8.69), SOS Romania (SOS RO, 7.79 / 8.69), Hungary's Our Homeland Movement (MHM, 7.74 / 9.06), and Fidesz in Hungary (7.68 / 9.20). This quadrant reflects the national-conservative and illiberal variant of the PRR, predominantly found in Central and Eastern Europe. Here, authoritarianism—manifested through securitarianism, traditional family values, and illiberal statecraft—tends to be more salient than overt ethno-nationalist exclusion.

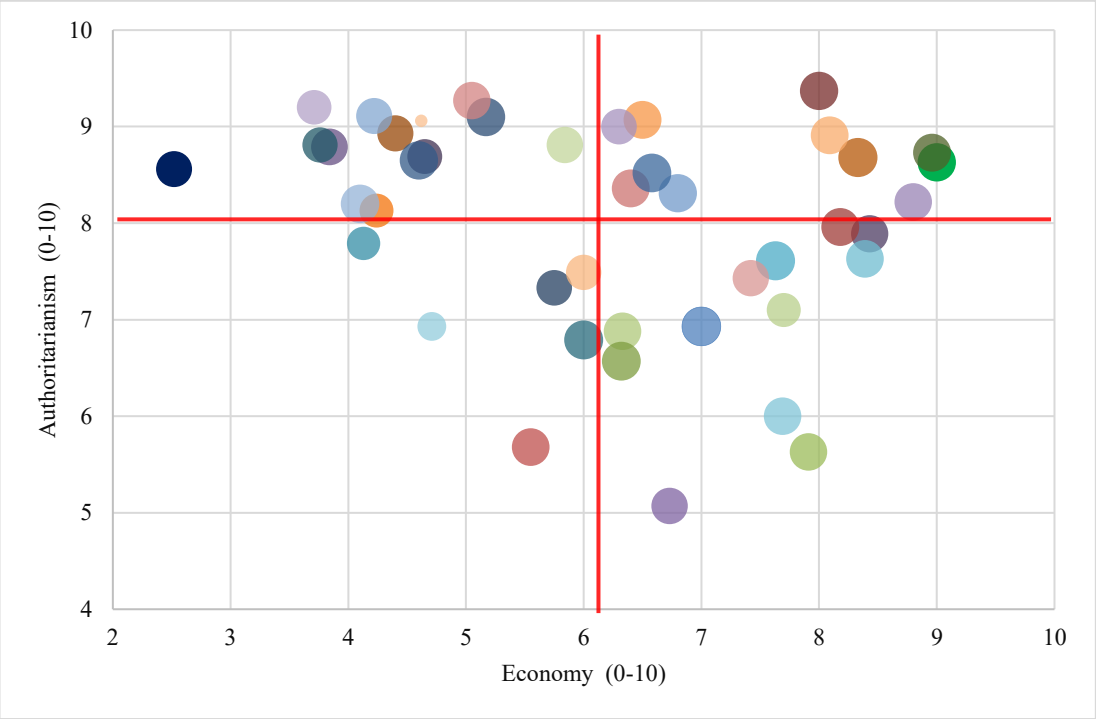
The lower-right quadrant—combining high nativism with comparatively lower levels of authoritarianism—includes parties that adopt strongly exclusionary positions on immigration and national identity yet articulate more moderate or even liberal stances on governance and moral issues. Notable examples include several Western and Nordic European parties with pronounced anti-immigration profiles but a relatively liberal orientation on social values: the French Rassemblement National (RN, 9.71 / 6.79); the Sweden Democrats (SD, 9.65 / 6.57); the Danish People's Party (DPP, 9.09 / 5.68); the Danish New Right (NB, 8.99 / 5.63); the Belgian Vlaams Belang (VB, 9.62 / 6.93); the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV, 9.03 / 6.88); the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP, 8.75 / 6.00); Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, 9.78 / 7.61); Spain's Se Acabó la Fiesta (SALF, 8.89 / 7.89); and the Finns Party (PS, 9.20 / 7.96). This quadrant illustrates a liberal nativist profile, more common in Western and Nordic European contexts, where hostility to immigration—particularly Muslim immigration—constitutes the central ideological axis, while authoritarian moral conservatism is less pronounced or altogether absent.

Finally, the lower-left quadrant—representing parties with lower levels of both nativism and authoritarianism—includes formations that, although classified within the PRR family, occupy a more peripheral or transitional position. These parties typically exhibit more moderate, ambivalent, or evolving ideological orientations. Key examples include Jobbik in Hungary (5.31 / 6.93), following its programmatic moderation; Resni.ca in Slovenia (7.42 / 7.10); the Bulgarian party Morality, Unity, Honour (MECh, 7.12 / 7.79); the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG, Switzerland, 7.99 / 7.49); National Alliance of Latvia (NA, 8.12 / 7.33); and the Czech party Motorists for Themselves (MOTO, 8.46 / 7.43). This quadrant reflects the ideological margins of the PRR, encompassing hybrid, emerging, or de-radicalising parties. Jobbik stands out as the paradigmatic case of ideological moderation and repositioning.

To deepen the understanding of this internal heterogeneity, the next section turns to the economic dimension of the PRR (Figure 15). While these parties are often studied through the lenses of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, their economic positioning has become increasingly relevant—particularly in light of programmatic transformations over time. By examining party stances on

redistribution, market regulation, and state intervention, it becomes possible to trace diverging economic trajectories within the PRR family. In doing so, this analysis also engages with the theoretical framework proposed by Kitschelt and McGann (1995), which emphasises how radical right parties evolve by combining authoritarian cultural appeals with varying degrees of economic liberalism or interventionism, depending on national context and electoral opportunity.

Figure 15. Economic and authoritarian positioning of European PRR parties: strategic variants in light of the "winning formulas"



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: The horizontal axis represents parties' economic position (0–10), while the vertical axis captures levels of authoritarianism (0–10). Bubble size indicates the degree of nativism. The intersecting dashed lines correspond to the mean values of economy (≈6.20) and authoritarianism (≈8.01), thereby dividing the plot into four quadrants that highlight different ideological profiles within the European PRR.

Figure 15 illustrates the positioning of European PRR parties according to their scores on economic orientation (x-axis) and authoritarianism (y-axis), both measured on a 0–10 scale (Rovny et al., 2024) The division of parties into four quadrants serves as a useful heuristic device to visualise the internal heterogeneity of the PRR and to relate their profiles to the "winning formulas" identified by Kitschelt and McGann (1995). This mapping highlights how PRR parties combine stances on the economic left–right dimension with varying levels of

authoritarianism, thereby reflecting the coexistence of distinct strategic models within the party family.

The upper-right quadrant—characterised by economic liberalism and high authoritarianism—includes parties that exemplify the classical liberal–authoritarian variant of the PRR, corresponding to what Kitschelt and McGann termed the "old winning formula." These parties are marked by strong advocacy of market liberalism, low levels of redistribution, deregulation, and pronounced authoritarianism in matters of law, order, and morality. Representative examples include Konfederacja in Poland (9.21 / 8.73); Vox in Spain (9.00 / 8.63); Forum voor Democratie in the Netherlands (8.80 / 8.22); Éric Zemmour's Reconquête in France (REC, 8.33 / 8.68); Switzerland's Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC, 8.33 / 8.21); Chega in Portugal (8.09 / 8.91); Voice of Reason (FL) in Greece (8.00 / 9.37); Lega in Italy (6.80 / 8.31); the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ, 6.58 / 8.52); Greek Solution (EL, 6.50 / 9.07); and Brothers of Italy (FdI, 6.40 / 8.36). This quadrant is predominantly populated by parties from Western and Mediterranean Europe, where anti-immigration stances, anti-Islamic rhetoric, and authoritarian moral conservatism converge to produce some of the most radicalised expressions of the PRR.

The upper-left quadrant—marked by economic interventionism and high authoritarianism—is populated by parties that exemplify a "new winning formula," in which authoritarianism is combined with redistributive, protectionist, and welfare-oriented policies. These parties articulate a form of welfare chauvinism, expanding social protection while restricting its benefits to the national in-group. Prototypical cases include PiS in Poland, which is situated furthest to the economic left within the PRR family (2.52 / 8.56); Revival (Vazrazhdane) in Bulgaria (3.84 / 8.79); Fidesz–KDNP in Hungary (3.71 / 9.20); the Romanian Party of Young People (POT, 4.22 / 9.11); Velichie in Bulgaria (4.24 / 8.13); the Slovak National Party (SNS, 4.40 / 8.93); the Lithuanian National Alliance (NS, 4.38 / 8.46); the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR, 4.65 / 8.69); the National Popular Front (ELAM) in Cyprus (4.60 / 8.65); Our Homeland Movement (MHM) in Hungary (4.62 / 9.06); Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) in the Czech Republic (4.10 / 8.20); Republika in Slovakia (5.05 / 9.27); Spartans in Greece (5.17 / 9.10); and the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE, 5.84 / 8.81). This quadrant reflects

the consolidation of illiberal, national-conservative models in Central and Eastern Europe, where authoritarianism is reinforced by state-led redistribution strategically targeted at the national in-group—thereby amplifying exclusionary dynamics and enabling clientelist forms of welfare governance.The lower-right quadrant—characterised by economic liberalism and lower authoritarianism—includes parties that endorse free-market economics but adopt less rigid or doctrinaire positions on authoritarian governance or moral traditionalism. While they remain strongly nativist and exclusionary, their cultural conservatism is comparatively less pronounced. Representative examples include: Se Acabó la Fiesta in Spain (SALF, 8.43 / 7.89); Reform UK (8.39 / 7.63); the Finns Party (PS, 8.18 / 7.96); the Danish New Right (NB, 7.91 / 5.63); the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP, 7.69 / 6.00); Resni.ca in Slovenia (7.70 / 7.10); Motorists for Themselves in the Czech Republic (MOTO, 7.42 / 7.43); Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, 7.63 / 7.61); Vlaams Belang in Belgium (VB, 7.00 / 6.93); the Danish People's Party (DPP, 6.73 / 5.68); the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV, 6.33 / 6.88); the Sweden Democrats (SD, 6.32 / 6.57); and Rassemblement National in France (RN, 6.00 / 6.79). This liberal–nativist variant is most prevalent in Northern and Western Europe, particularly in secularised societies where hostility to immigration—especially Muslim immigration—constitutes the primary axis of mobilisation, while religious or traditionalist concerns play a secondary role. Economically, these parties advocate tax cuts, deregulation, and limited state intervention, aligning with a pro-business, market-oriented agenda that distinguishes them from more protectionist or redistributive PRR formations.

The lower-left quadrant—marked by economic interventionism and lower authoritarianism—encompasses the most peripheral or transitional expressions of the PRR. These parties favour state intervention but exhibit moderate or declining levels of authoritarianism. Some represent hybrid formations or clear cases of ideological de-radicalisation. The most paradigmatic case is Jobbik in Hungary (4.71 / 6.93), which has significantly moderated its programme in recent years. Other examples include Velichie (4.24 / 8.13); Morality, Unity, Honour (MECh, 4.13 / 7.79); National Alliance of Latvia (NA, 5.75 / 7.33); and the Geneva Citizens' Movement in Switzerland (MCG, 6.00 / 7.49). This quadrant reflects the least consolidated segment of the PRR party family, characterised by high programmatic

volatility, weaker ideological anchoring, and greater internal diversity. While some parties—such as Jobbik—represent clear trajectories of moderation, others, like MECh or MCG, embody hybrid or still-evolving formations.

The mapping exercise reveals that distinct regional patterns are central to understanding the internal heterogeneity of the European PRR. In Southern and Western Europe, the upper-right quadrants of both mappings are densely populated by parties such as Vox (Spain), Chega (Portugal), Reconquête (France), the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC), and Forum voor Democratie (Netherlands). These parties exemplify the liberal–authoritarian variant of the PRR, combining market-oriented or neoliberal economic positions with pronounced authoritarian conservatism and exclusionary nationalism. Italy constitutes a particularly illustrative case: while both Lega and Brothers of Italy fall within this quadrant in terms of authoritarianism, their economic profiles lean slightly closer to welfare chauvinism than to full economic liberalism. Nevertheless, the Italian examples underscore the consolidation of the PRR in Southern Europe and the strategic adaptability of these parties to electorates receptive to free-market policies framed within narratives of cultural conservatism and moral order.

By contrast, Central and Eastern Europe are more prominently represented in the upper-left quadrant, corresponding to Kitschelt's "new winning formula." In this configuration, authoritarianism is combined with economic interventionism, redistribution, and protectionist measures, producing a distinctive illiberal and national-conservative profile. Parties such as PiS in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary, the Slovak National Party (SNS), Republika in Slovakia, and AUR in Romania exemplify this model. These parties articulate a form of welfare chauvinism that merges authoritarian moral conservatism and exclusionary nationalism with redistributive strategies aimed at compensating for the structural weakness—or outright collapse—of the traditional left. PiS and Fidesz stand as paradigmatic cases of this trajectory.

In Northern Europe and parts of Western Europe, a different pattern emerges in the lower-right quadrant: the liberal–nativist variant of the PRR. Parties such as Rassemblement National (France), Vlaams Belang (Belgium), the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats, the Danish People's Party, and the Norwegian Progress Party fall within this category. Their

programmes combine strong opposition to immigration and multiculturalism with comparatively weaker authoritarian or moral-conservative appeals. This reflects a more secularised variant of the PRR, in which hostility towards immigration—particularly Muslim immigration—constitutes the central axis of mobilisation, while religious or traditionalist concerns play a secondary role.

Finally, the lower-left quadrant encompasses more peripheral or transitional cases within the PRR party family. These parties adopt relatively interventionist economic positions while exhibiting moderate or declining levels of authoritarianism. Examples include Jobbik in Hungary, Resni.ca in Slovenia, the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG) in Switzerland, and several Bulgarian formations such as MECh and Velichie. Some of these parties represent hybrid models, while others—such as Jobbik—illustrate processes of de-radicalisation and programmatic moderation.

Taken together, these findings confirm that while the PRR shares a cohesive ideological core, its concrete articulation varies significantly across regions. Southern and Western Europe are characterised by liberal–authoritarian configurations; Central and Eastern Europe by illiberal and redistributive variants; Northern Europe by a secular, liberal–nativist profile; and the periphery by hybrid or moderating trajectories. This geographical differentiation underscores the context-dependent nature of PRR strategies and the enduring importance of national political legacies in shaping party evolution. This regional heterogeneity also manifests at the supranational level, particularly within the European Parliament, where PRR parties are dispersed across multiple political groups rather than forming a cohesive bloc. This institutional fragmentation highlights the persistent ideological, strategic, and national divergences that hinder unified action at the EU level.

The largest of these groupings is Patriots for Europe, which currently holds 84 seats and centres its programme on the defence of national sovereignty and the primacy of citizens' rights within nation-states. The group was founded in 2024, strategically coinciding with the start of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, and launched under the Trump-inspired slogan Make Europe Great Again. The initiative was spearheaded by Viktor Orbán, alongside Andrej Babiš of the Czech ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) and Herbert Kickl, leader of Austria's Freedom

Party (FPÖ). In the days following its formation, the entirety of the former Identity and Democracy (ID) group progressively merged into Patriots for Europe. Its current membership includes a broad range of PRR parties such as Chega, Vox, Rassemblement National, Lega, Vlaams Belang, the Party for Freedom (PVV), the Danish People's Party, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Fidesz, National Alliance of Latvia, as well as Foni Logikis (Greece), Přísaha, and Motoristé (Czech Republic) (Patriots, 2025).

The second-largest group is the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which holds 78 seats. ECR promotes a conservative and Eurorealist agenda, combining support for economic liberalism—including free markets, low taxation, and administrative streamlining—with traditionalist values such as the defence of the family, national identity, and strict migration control. The group is firmly opposed to European federalism and further political integration. PRR parties affiliated with ECR include The Party is Over (SALF) in Spain, Identité et Libertés in France (a splinter from Reconquête led by Marion Maréchal), Brothers of Italy, the New Flemish Alliance, the Denmark Democrats, the Sweden Democrats, the Finns Party, PiS, Greek Solution, ELAM, and AUR (ECR, 2025).

A third cluster is represented by the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group, which holds 25 seats. ESN advocates the preservation of European cultural identity, the reinforcement of national sovereignty within the EU, a re-evaluation of climate policy in favour of market-based mechanisms, and the implementation of strict border controls to prevent irregular migration and protect national security. The group was established in 2024 by Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), following its expulsion from the ID group by Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, in response to public backlash over remarks by AfD's lead candidate, Maximilian Krah, who appeared to downplay crimes committed by the SS during the Second World War. In addition to 14 AfD MEPs, the group includes representatives from the Our Homeland Movement (Hungary), Revival (Bulgaria), Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) in the Czech Republic, Republika (Slovakia), the Union of the People and Justice (Lithuania), one MEP from Reconquête (France), and three MEPs from Konfederacja (Poland).

This institutional fragmentation reflects the limited organisational cohesion of the PRR at the EU level. Rather than operating as a unified political family, PRR parties

in the European Parliament function primarily as nationally embedded actors, whose ability to coordinate is constrained by ideological divergences, strategic competition, and regionally specific priorities. As such, the European Parliament acts as a mirror of the broader heterogeneity within the PRR, reinforcing the argument that—while the "party family" label remains analytically useful—it does not translate into a coherent or unified political bloc at the supranational level.

6.2 The positioning of Vox and PiS within the European PRR party family.

6.2.1 Vox: a southern liberal-authoritarian PRR variant

As demonstrated in Chapter 4 and throughout the preceding analysis, Vox represents both a paradigmatic and exceptional case within the European PRR. It is paradigmatic in its embodiment of the core ideological pillars of the PRR—nativism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism—yet exceptional in the specific configuration of these elements, shaped by Spain's distinctive historical legacies and political context.

Vox espouses a persistent and highly exclusionary form of nativism, placing a monocultural and ethnically homogeneous vision of the Spanish nation at the centre of its ideological project. This is accompanied by the criminalisation of immigration and the construction of Islam as a civilisational threat—discursive strategies that align with broader PRR patterns across Europe, but which in the Spanish context are further inflected by longstanding historical cleavages surrounding national unity, regional autonomy, and the rejection of plurinationalism.

Authoritarianism also occupies a central position in Vox's ideological profile. The party consistently emphasises law and order, national sovereignty, and the defence of traditional values, while exhibiting a systematic rejection of liberal rights frameworks—particularly with respect to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. These positions reflect a moral traditionalism deeply rooted in Catholic conservatism and cultural nationalism.

Economically, Vox advances a distinctly neoliberal agenda. Its advocacy for deregulation, tax reductions, and minimal redistributive policies situates it among the most economically right-leaning formations within the European PRR. In this regard, it mirrors the market-liberal orientations historically associated with the PRR during the 1980s and 1990s—prioritising fiscal orthodoxy, individual responsibility, and a limited role for the state.

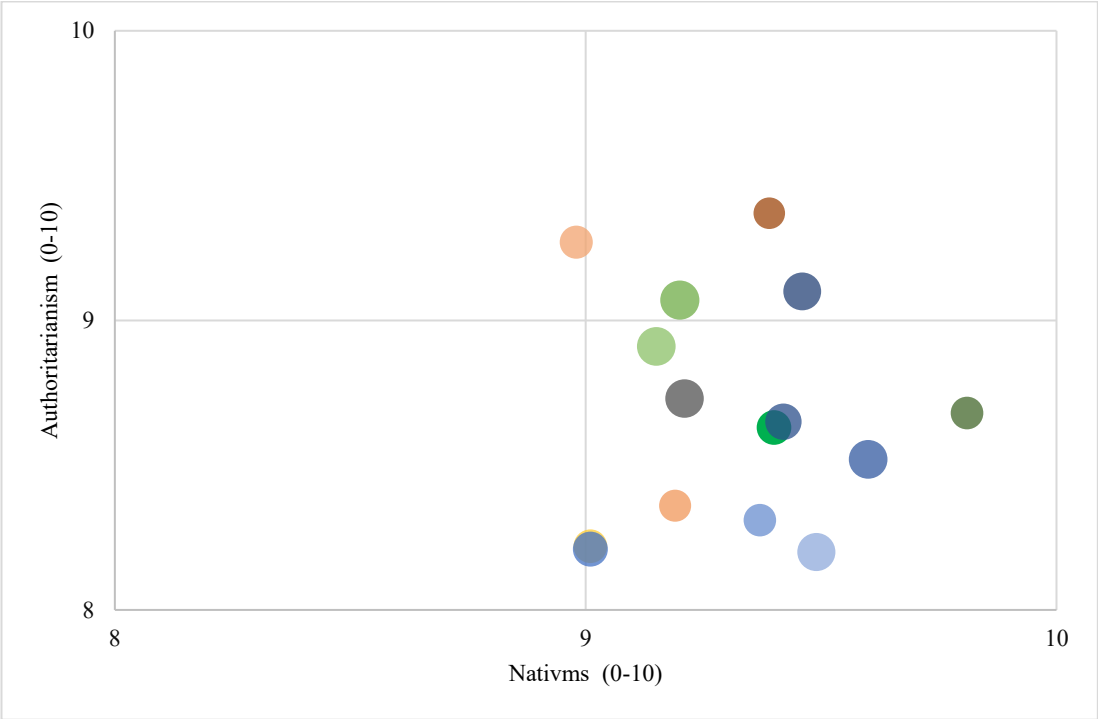
Having outlined Vox's ideological profile, the next subsection operationalises these dimensions using CHES 2024 (Jolly et al., 2024) to locate the party within the PRR's European landscape and to identify its closest counterparts.

6.2.1.1 Ideological orientation: nativism and authoritarianism

Drawing on CHES (Rovny et al, 2024) and the thematic configuration of its PRR profile, Vox is situated within the upper-right quadrant of the European PRR spectrum (Figure 16). This quadrant represents the ideological hard core—or "hot zone"—of the party family, where the most radical expressions are concentrated. It includes a range of Western and Mediterranean European parties that combine strongly exclusionary stances on immigration and multiculturalism with pronounced authoritarianism, particularly in relation to law and order, religious or moral traditionalism, and national identity. Parties within this cluster include the Greek formations Voice of Reason, Spartans, and Greek Solution; Éric Zemmour's Reconquête in France; the Italian parties Lega and Brothers of Italy (FdI); the Dutch Forum for Democracy (FvD); the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ); Chega in Portugal; the Cypriot National Popular Front (ELAM); Freedom and Direct Democracy in the Czech Republic (SPD); Konfederacja in Poland; Republika in Slovakia; and Switzerland's Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC).

Although co-located in the upper-right quadrant, these parties are not ideologically homogeneous. As Figure 16 indicates, meaningful dispersion persists along both the nativist and authoritarian axes. Vox clusters most closely with Chega, Brothers of Italy, Lega, Reconquête and Konfederacja, forming a sub-cluster characterised by exclusionary nationalism, culturally embedded religious conservatism and pronounced moral authoritarianism.

Figure 16. Ideological positioning of PRR parties in the upper-right quadrant: nativism and authoritarianism



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).).

Note: The horizontal axis represents levels of nativism (0–10), while the vertical axis captures levels of authoritarianism (0–10). Bubble size represents the degree of populism.

Regarding its nativist profile (see Table 19), Vox registers an aggregate score of 9.40, firmly placing it within the upper tier of the European PRR's nativist core. It closely resembles parties such as Reconquête (9.81), AfD (9.78), FPÖ (9.60), ELAM (9.42), Konfederacja (9.21), Lega (9.40), Brothers of Italy (9.19), and Chega (9.15). This high score reflects Vox's uncompromising opposition to immigration, multiculturalism, and cultural pluralism, anchoring it among the most exclusionary actors within the PRR.

Table 19. Nativist indicators for selected PRR parties in Europe

Party	Nativism (Total)	Immigration Policy (position)	Multiculturalism (position)	Nationalism (position)	Ethnic Minorities (position)	Anti-Islam Rhetoric (position)
Reconquête	9.81	9.67	9.81	10.00	9.67	10.00
Vox	9.40	9.69	9.94	9.63	9.38	8.83
Lega	9.40	9.87	9.77	9.20	8.00	9.50
Konfederacja	9.21	9.81	9.70	9.82	9.67	9.00
Brothers of Italy	9.19	9.46	9.33	9.50	9.50	8.50
Chega	9.15	9.72	9.78	9.25	9.00	7.71

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, as coded in the CHES dataset. Higher values indicate more exclusionary or nativist positions—e.g. stricter immigration policy, stronger opposition to multiculturalism, more pronounced nationalism, more negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and higher levels of Islamophobic rhetoric.

Among the individual components of the nativism index, immigration policy and multiculturalism emerge as the most radicalised dimensions across this cluster. Vox records near-maximum values in both indicators—9.69 on immigration policy and 9.94 on opposition to multiculturalism—placing it alongside Lega (9.87 / 9.77), Chega (9.72 / 9.78), and Konfederacja (9.81 / 9.70), and just below Reconquête (9.67 / 9.81), in its rejection of immigration and cultural diversity.

However, significant variation appears across other dimensions, particularly nationalism, attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and anti-Islam rhetoric. Vox scores 9.63 on nationalism, confirming a strong ethno-nationalist orientation—slightly below Reconquête (10.00) and Konfederacja (9.82), and comparable to Brothers of Italy (9.50) and Chega (9.25). On minority exclusion, Vox (9.38) aligns with Brothers of Italy (9.50) and Chega (9.00), while exhibiting a less radical profile than Konfederacja (9.67) and Reconquête (9.67), and a more exclusionary stance than Lega (8.00).

The most marked differentiation arises in anti-Islam rhetoric, where Vox (8.83) scores lower than Reconquête (10.00), Lega (9.50), Konfederacja (9.00), and Brothers of Italy (8.50), but notably higher than Chega (7.71). This suggests that,

while Islamophobia is clearly present in Vox's discourse, it is less central than in the narratives of its French, Italian, and Polish counterparts.

Taken together, the data confirm that Vox's nativist profile most closely resembles that of Chega and Brothers of Italy, with whom it shares not only a similarly high aggregate score (Chega 9.15; Brothers of Italy 9.19; Vox 9.40), but also near-identical levels of opposition to multiculturalism (Chega 9.78; Brothers of Italy 9.33; Vox 9.94) and immigration (Chega 9.72; Brothers of Italy 9.46; Vox 9.69). All three parties combine exclusionary nationalism with a Catholic-traditionalist orientation, and a comparatively moderate emphasis on Islamophobia: Vox (8.83), Chega (7.71), and Brothers of Italy (8.50) score well below Reconquête (10.00) and Konfederacja (9.00) on this dimension.

Lega, while recording the same aggregate score as Vox (9.40), diverges more notably in its lower score on minority exclusion (8.00 vs. Vox 9.38), suggesting a less racialised conception of national identity. Nevertheless, its strong alignment on immigration (9.87), multiculturalism (9.77), and Islam (9.50) reinforces its inclusion within the Southern European subvariant.

By contrast, Reconquête and Konfederacja represent a harder-edged expression of radical nativism, grounded in more secularised, civilisational framings. Both record higher or equal values than Vox across nearly all dimensions: Reconquête exceeds it on nationalism (10.00 vs. 9.63), minority exclusion (9.67 vs. 9.38), and Islamophobia (10.00 vs. 8.83); Konfederacja similarly scores higher on nationalism (9.82), minority exclusion (9.67), and Islamophobia (9.00). These parties articulate a more ideologically maximalist vision of exclusion, firmly rooted in a Northern and Central European context.

In sum, Vox clusters most closely with Chega, Brothers of Italy, and—though more distantly—Lega, forming a distinct Southern European PRR subpattern defined by hard-line nativism, Catholic-traditionalist values, and a moderated, though persistent, Islamophobic discourse.

While nativism forms the ideological backbone of Vox's identity, authoritarianism constitutes a second key axis through which its vision of order and sovereignty is articulated. Vox registers an aggregate score of 8.63 on the authoritarianism index (see Table 20), positioning it firmly within the upper tier of the PRR party family. Its profile aligns most closely with Chega (8.91), Konfederacja (8.73), and

Reconquête (8.68), all of which exhibit consistently high levels of authoritarianism across multiple subdimensions. By contrast, Brothers of Italy (8.36) and Lega (8.31) record slightly lower scores, though they remain situated within the higher range of the PRR spectrum.

Table 20. Authoritarian indicators for selected PRR parties in Europe

Party	Authoritarianism (Total)	Democratic freedom and rights (position)	Civil Liberties vs Law and Order (position)	Religious principles in politics (position)	Support for Women Rights (position)	Support for LGBT+ Rights (position)	Same-Sex Marriage (position)
Chega	8.91	9.64	10	8	7.00	10	8.83
Konfederacja	8.73	8.41	7.88	7.70	8.91	9.57	9.92
Reconquête	8.68	9.10	9.50	5.86	8.75	9.60	9.25
Vox	8.63	9.50	9.86	8.29	8.62	7.50	8.00
Brothers of Italy	8.36	9.13	8.83	7.67	6.75	9.00	8.80
Lega	8.31	8.87	8.67	7.25	6.78	9.40	8.89

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales in the CHES 2024 dataset. Higher values indicate more authoritarian positions—e.g. greater scepticism towards democratic freedoms, preference for law and order over civil liberties, stronger religious influence in politics, and more restrictive views on gender equality, LGBT+ rights, and same-sex marriage.

Among the most radicalised dimensions within this cluster are law and order and restrictions on democratic rights. Vox (9.86) scores second only to Chega (10.00) on the law-and-order axis, indicating a strong preference for punitive state power and coercive authority. On the curtailment of democratic rights, Vox (9.50) again aligns closely with Chega (9.64), Reconquête (9.10), and Konfederacja (8.41), underscoring a shared scepticism towards liberal democratic safeguards and institutional pluralism.

Religious traditionalism also emerges as a distinguishing feature. Vox (8.29) and Chega (8.00) score notably higher than Konfederacja (7.70) and significantly above Reconquête (5.86), reflecting the stronger influence of Catholic moral doctrine in Iberian authoritarianism. By contrast, Reconquête and Konfederacja articulate a

more secular authoritarianism, rooted in civilisational nationalism or illiberal libertarianism.

In terms of gender equality and minority rights, all parties in the cluster adopt restrictive positions, but variation remains notable. Vox (8.62) expresses a pronounced anti-feminist stance, comparable to Konfederacja (8.91) and Reconquête (8.75), but more moderate than Chega (7.00). On LGBT+ rights, Konfederacja (9.57), ELAM (9.50), and Reconquête (9.60) occupy the most repressive positions, while Vox (7.50) maintains a restrictive yet comparatively moderate profile. Similarly, on same-sex marriage, Vox (8.00) appears more moderate than Konfederacja (9.92) and Reconquête (9.25), aligning more closely with Brothers of Italy (8.80) and Lega (8.89), both of which maintain strong opposition while avoiding maximalist rhetoric.

Taken together, the data confirm that Vox's authoritarian profile aligns most closely with that of Chega and Brothers of Italy, with whom it shares not only a high aggregate score (Chega: 8.91; Brothers of Italy: 8.36; Vox: 8.63), but also a common emphasis on law and order (Chega: 10.00; Brothers of Italy: 8.83; Vox: 9.86) and religious moralism (Chega: 8.00; Brothers of Italy: 7.67; Vox: 8.29). These three parties articulate authoritarianism through a Catholic-traditionalist framework, privileging cultural hierarchy, moral order, and national sovereignty. Although their positions on gender and sexual rights remain restrictive, they are less doctrinaire than those of their Northern and Central European counterparts. For example, Vox (7.50 / 8.00), Chega (10.00 / 8.83), and Brothers of Italy (9.00 / 8.80) all score lower on LGBT+ rights and same-sex marriage than Konfederacja (9.57 / 9.92) and Reconquête (9.60 / 9.25), suggesting a more moderated illiberalism in this policy domain.

Lega, while close in aggregate terms (8.31), diverges slightly due to its lower scores on democratic rights (8.87 vs. Vox 9.50) and religious traditionalism (7.25 vs. Vox 8.29), suggesting a more pragmatic or secularised authoritarianism. Nevertheless, its consistently restrictive positions across civil liberties and gender issues reinforce its inclusion within the broader Southern European configuration.

By contrast, Reconquête and Konfederacja embody a more uncompromising, ideologically maximalist variant of PRR authoritarianism, marked by strong scepticism towards liberal rights (Reconquête: 9.10; Konfederacja: 8.41), a

civilisational emphasis on order and identity, and the most restrictive stances on gender and sexual minorities across the sample. Their comparatively lower reliance on religion (Reconquête: 5.86; Konfederacja: 7.70) further distinguishes them from the confessional traditionalism found in the Iberian and Italian cases.

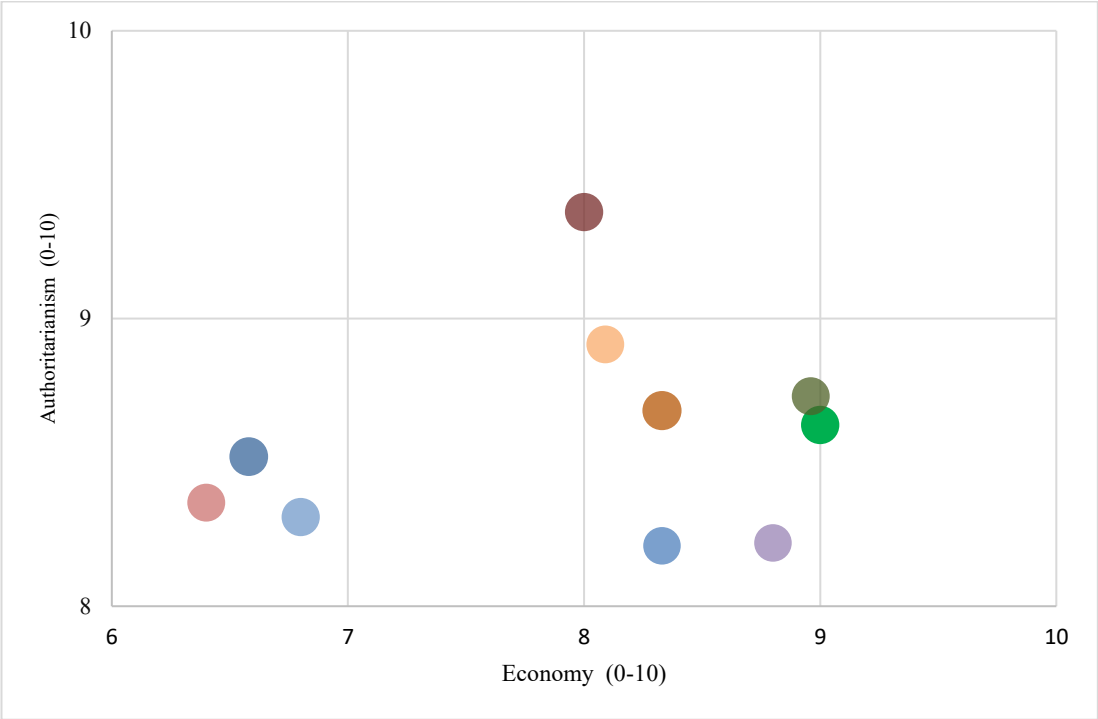
In sum, Vox clusters most closely with Chega, Brothers of Italy, and to a lesser extent Lega, forming a distinct Southern European authoritarian subpattern within the PRR. This variant combines strong support for state authority and moral conservatism with a less overtly secular and less repressive stance on gender and sexuality than that characteristic of the more rigid, civilisational authoritarianism exemplified by Reconquête and Konfederacja..

6.2.1.2 Economic orientation: neoliberalism with Iberian specificities

In addition to its nativist and authoritarian profile, Vox's economic orientation further consolidates its position within the liberal–authoritarian configuration of the European PRR. As shown in Figure 16, the party is located in the upper-right quadrant of the spectrum, corresponding to what Kitschelt and McGann (1995) famously described as the "old winning formula." This cluster is characterised by strong commitments to market liberalism, low levels of economic redistribution, deregulation, and pronounced authoritarianism in matters of law, order, and morality. Representative examples include Konfederacja (Poland), Forum voor Democratie (Netherlands), Éric Zemmour's Reconquête (France), the Swiss People's Party (Switzerland), Chega (Portugal), Voice of Reason (Greece), Lega (Italy), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Greek Solution, and Brothers of Italy.

However, despite their shared ideological orientation—combining economic liberalism with cultural and moral authoritarianism—these parties are far from homogeneous. As illustrated in Figure 17, considerable variation exists within this quadrant, both in terms of economic positioning and the intensity of authoritarian preferences. With a score of 9.00 on the economic left–right scale (see Table 20), Vox emerges as the most economically right-leaning formation within the European PRR, signalling a strong commitment to neoliberal orthodoxy. In this respect, it aligns most closely with parties such as Konfederacja (Poland), Forum voor Democratie (FvD) (Netherlands), the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC), Reconquête (France), and Chega (Portugal).

Figure 17. Economic and authoritarian positioning of PRR parties in the upper-right quadrant: strategic variants in light of the "winning formulas"



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: The horizontal axis represents parties' economic position (0–10), while the vertical axis captures levels of authoritarianism (0–10). Bubble size indicates the degree of nativism. The intersecting dashed lines correspond to the mean values of economy (≈6.20) and authoritarianism (≈8.01), thereby dividing the plot into four quadrants that highlight different ideological profiles within the European PRR.

Table 21. Economic orientation for selected PRR parties in Europe

Party	Economic left-right	Position on redistribution	Public services vs tax cuts	Deregulation	Protectionism
Vox	9.00	8.56	9.63	8.71	6.88
Konfederacja	8.96	8.67	9.38	8.46	4.82
FvD	8.80	7.13	7.00	8.17	4.00
SVP/UDC	8.33	8.26	8.60	6.60	6.50
Reconquête	8.33	7.89	8.50	5.80	6.83
Chega	8.10	6.60	7.80	6.75	7.00

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All indicators are measured on 0–10 scales in the CHES 2024 dataset. Higher values denote more economically right-wing positions—i.e. lower support for redistribution, stronger preference for tax cuts over public services, greater support for deregulation, and less economic protectionism. The "Economic Left–Right" variable reflects overall economic ideology; subdimensions illustrate positions on key policy areas.

Vox and Konfederacja (8.96) form the vanguard of a PRR cluster most consistently committed to free-market orthodoxy, combining robust anti-redistributive stances with a strong preference for tax cuts and deregulation. Their position places them at the ideological frontier of market liberalism within the PRR family—surpassing Chega (8.10), Reconquête (8.33), and SVP/UDC (8.33).

The redistribution indicator further underscores Vox's fiscally orthodox profile. With a score of 8.56, it is firmly anchored at the anti-redistributive pole of the PRR, closely aligned with Konfederacja (8.67). By contrast, Chega (6.60) adopts a more moderate stance, while Reconquête (7.89) and SVP/UDC (8.26) occupy intermediate positions, suggesting a greater tolerance for limited state welfare provisions.

On the public services versus tax cuts dimension, Vox (9.63) once again emerges as one of the most uncompromising cases, strongly prioritising tax reduction over social investment. Its profile mirrors that of Konfederacja (9.38), confirming a fiscal model rooted in individual responsibility and market efficiency over state-led provision.

In terms of deregulation, Vox (8.71) reinforces its economically liberal orientation, advocating the rollback of state intervention to a degree comparable to Konfederacja (8.46). In contrast, Reconquête (5.80) and SVP/UDC (6.60) adopt more tempered approaches—likely reflecting institutional legacies and regulatory traditions in their respective national contexts.

However, the indicator of protectionism introduces a moderating nuance to Vox's otherwise strongly neoliberal profile. With a score of 6.88, Vox aligns with Chega (7.00) and Reconquête (6.83) in combining economic liberalism with moderate protective instincts, particularly in relation to domestic industries. This contrasts with the more globalist profiles of Konfederacja (4.82) and FvD (4.00), which represent the least protectionist pole within the European PRR.

Taken together, the data confirm that Vox's economic profile is most closely aligned with that of Konfederacja, with whom it shares the most consistently neoliberal configuration within the European PRR. Both parties occupy the top positions on the economic left–right axis (Vox: 9.00; Konfederacja: 8.96), signalling a strong ideological commitment to fiscal orthodoxy, deregulation, and minimal state intervention. Vox scores 8.56 on redistribution, 9.63 on public services versus tax cuts, and 8.71 on deregulation—figures that mirror those of Konfederacja (8.67 / 9.38 / 8.46) and confirm their shared opposition to redistributive politics and preference for market-led welfare regimes.

By contrast, Chega, SVP/UDC, and Reconquête articulate more hybrid economic profiles. Although all three score highly on the general economic left–right scale (Chega: 8.10; SVP/UDC: 8.33; Reconquête: 8.33), they exhibit less doctrinaire positions on key policy-subdimensions. Chega, for instance, scores lower on redistribution (6.60), reflecting a degree of social populism absent in the Vox–Konfederacja model. Similarly, SVP/UDC (6.60) and Reconquête (5.80) adopt more pragmatic stances on deregulation, likely reflecting the enduring influence of embedded welfare or regulatory institutions in their domestic political economies.

The protectionism indicator introduces an additional axis of differentiation. While Konfederacja (4.82) and FvD (4.00) represent the most globalist expressions of PRR economic policy, Vox (6.88) adopts a moderately protectionist position, aligning more closely with Chega (7.00) and Reconquête (6.83). This suggests that, while Vox maintains a firm neoliberal orientation, it also articulates a degree of

economic nationalism—particularly in relation to strategic sectors or domestic production—consistent with the structural vulnerabilities and political economy of the Iberian context.

In sum, Vox and Konfederacja form the neoliberal core of the European PRR, consistently advocating tax cuts, deregulation, and limited redistribution. However, Vox's economic liberalism is tempered by moderate protectionist instincts, placing it closer to Chega, Reconquête, and SVP/UDC than to the fully globalist profile of FvD.

6.2.1.3 Positioning Vox within the European PRR

Vox is anchored within the upper-right quadrant of the European PRR spectrum—what may be described as the ideological "hot zone" of the party family. Here, the convergence of high nativism and pronounced authoritarianism defines a core cluster of PRR actors. Vox exhibits a consistently exclusionary profile, registering near-maximum scores on immigration control and opposition to multiculturalism, alongside a robust nationalist orientation. However, in contrast to the most radical expressions of ethno-nationalist mobilisation found in Central and Northern Europe, Vox articulates exclusion through a more confessional and cultural lens, rather than through overt civilisational antagonism or racialised scapegoating. In this respect, its profile aligns more closely with other Southern European parties such as Chega, Brothers of Italy, and Lega.

Authoritarianism constitutes a second key axis of Vox's ideological configuration. The party scores particularly high on dimensions related to law and order, democratic constraints, and the role of religion in politics. Nonetheless, it falls short of the maximalist thresholds observed in parties such as Reconquête and Konfederacja, whose authoritarianism is more systematic and ideologically uncompromising. Instead, Vox presents a calibrated authoritarianism, grounded in Catholic traditionalism, national sovereignty, and cultural moralism, rather than a fully-fledged illiberal or post-democratic project. This profile is particularly evident in its comparatively less extreme positions on gender equality and LGBT+ rights, where it adopts a restrictive stance that is nonetheless more moderate than that of its Central and Eastern European counterparts.

Economically, Vox represents one of the most neoliberal configurations within the European PRR. With its strong opposition to redistribution, prioritisation of tax cuts

over public spending, and preference for deregulation, Vox closely mirrors the economic orientation of Konfederacja. However, in contrast to the more globalist variant espoused by parties such as FvD or Konfederacja itself, Vox introduces a degree of economic protectionism—particularly in relation to strategic sectors or national industries. This hybrid profile reflects both the structural characteristics of the Spanish political economy and the broader Iberian context, where market liberalism is tempered by concerns over national autonomy and socio-economic vulnerability.

Taken together, Vox exemplifies a Southern European liberal–authoritarian variant of the PRR, combining hard-line nativism and moral conservatism with a strong neoliberal orientation, softened by selective protectionist impulses. Among its European counterparts, Chega emerges as its closest analogue—sharing both a confessional nationalist discourse and a similarly orthodox economic agenda, though with a more pronounced protectionist orientation. Brothers of Italy and Lega also display ideological affinities with Vox in the cultural and authoritarian domains, though their economic programmes are more closely aligned with welfare chauvinism. By contrast, parties such as Reconquête and Konfederacja represent a more radicalised variant of PRR politics, distinguished by systematic authoritarianism and a civilisationally framed nativism.

In sum, Vox occupies a strategically significant position within the European PRR landscape. It articulates an ideologically coherent synthesis of exclusionary nationalism, moral traditionalism, and market liberalism, embedded within the specific political, religious, and economic structures of Southern Europe. Its profile illustrates how regional contexts mediate the articulation of radical right ideology, shaping distinct subpatterns within an otherwise transnational party family.

6.2.2 PiS and the authoritarian-interventionist model of the central eastern PRR

As demonstrated in Chapter 5 and throughout the preceding analysis, PiS represent a paradigmatic case of the PRR in Central and Eastern Europe. It articulates a distinct illiberal project that combines exclusionary nationalism, moral authoritarianism, and economic interventionism, all deeply rooted in Poland's post-communist context.

Nativism forms a core ideological pillar of PiS's political identity, underpinned by a vision of the Polish nation as ethnically homogeneous, culturally Catholic, and historically continuous. National identity is framed as inherited and immutable, while ethnic minorities and non-European migrants—particularly Muslims—are portrayed as civilisational threats to social cohesion and national sovereignty. This narrative is reinforced through the instrumentalisation of collective memory, curriculum reforms, and nationalist cultural policies, which legitimise exclusionary measures in the name of preserving Polishness.

Authoritarianism is likewise a defining feature of PiS's political project, evident both in its institutional practice and its broader normative agenda. Since taking office, the party has pursued a strategy of state centralisation, securitisation, and legal restructuring aimed at curbing judicial independence, undermining media pluralism, and consolidating executive authority. Closely aligned with the Catholic Church, PiS advances a culturally conservative worldview centred on moral order, gender hierarchy, and national homogeneity—framing feminism and LGBT+ rights as existential threats to Polish identity.

In the economic sphere, PiS promotes a strongly interventionist and redistributive agenda embedded within a national-conservative framework. Rejecting neoliberal orthodoxy, the party positions the state as a key guarantor of economic security and social cohesion, while simultaneously deploying welfare as a mechanism to reinforce national loyalty and cultural exclusivity. Its model of welfare nationalism fuses protectionist economic measures with culturally bounded solidarity.

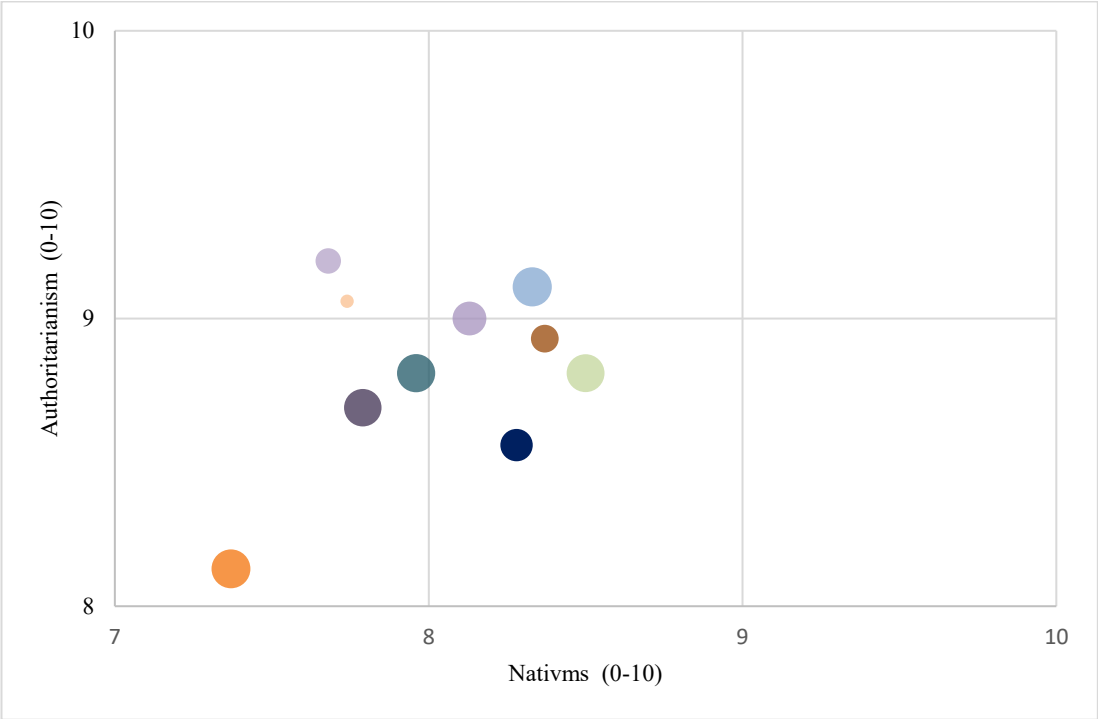
Having established the ideological foundations of PiS, the next subsection draws on CHES 2024 data to empirically situate the party within the broader European PRR landscape, identifying its closest ideological counterparts.

6.2.2.1 Ideological orientation: nativism and authoritarianism

PiS is positioned in the upper-left quadrant of the European PRR spectrum (see Figure 15). This quadrant corresponds to a national-conservative and illiberal variant of the PRR that predominates in Central and Eastern Europe, where parties exhibit less extreme nativism alongside more salient authoritarianism rooted in religious conservatism, moral traditionalism, and a strong emphasis on sovereignty and order. Parties in this cluster include Bulgaria's Revival (Vazrazhdane) and Velichie, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), the Slovak National Party (SNS), Romania's Party of Young People (POT) and SOS Romania, Croatia's Homeland Movement (DP), Poland's PiS, and Hungary's Our Homeland Movement (MHM) and Fidesz–KDNP, among others. Here, authoritarianism—manifested through securitarianism, traditional family values, and illiberal statecraft—tends to be more salient than overt ethno-nationalist exclusion.

Although co-located within the upper-left quadrant, these parties are not ideologically homogeneous. As Figure 18 indicates, non-trivial dispersion persists along both the nativist and authoritarian axes. PiS lies in close proximity to SNS, POT, SOS Romania, and Fidesz–KDNP

Figure 18. Ideological positioning of PRR parties in the upper-left quadrant: nativism and authoritarianism



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: The horizontal axis represents levels of nativism (0–10), while the vertical axis captures levels of authoritarianism (0–10). Bubble size represents the degree of populism

Regarding its nativist profile (see Table 22), PiS records a total score of 8.28, marginally below those registered by the most radical actors in the region, such as SNS (8.37) and POT (8.33). It nonetheless adopts a consistently exclusionary stance on key indicators. PiS scores particularly highly on immigration policy (8.75), opposition to multiculturalism (9.16) and nationalism (9.07), aligning it with actors such as Croatia's DP (9.80 on nationalism) and Fidesz–KDNP (10.00 on nationalism). These scores point to a pronounced rejection of pluralist frameworks and a strong commitment to a culturally homogeneous national identity, grounded in sovereignty, moral order, and Catholic traditionalism.

Table 22.Nativist indicators for selected PRR parties in Europe

Party	Nativism (total)	Immigration Policy (position)	Multiculturalism (position)	Nationalism (position)	Attitude towards Ethnic Minorities (position)	Anti-Islam Rhetoric (position)
PiS	8.28	8.75	9.16	9.07	8.13	7.10
DP	8.13	9.35	8.69	9.80	9.40	3.25
POT	8.33	9.00	9.83	10	10	6.75
SNS	8.37	9.38	9.40	9.75	9.43	6.63
Fidesz-KDNP	7.68	9.78	8.74	10	5.20	4.00
SOS RO	7.96	9.50	9.44	9.70	9.81	4.63

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Jolly et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, as coded in the CHES dataset. Higher values indicate more exclusionary or nativist positions—for example, stricter immigration policy, stronger opposition to multiculturalism, more pronounced nationalism, more negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and more Islamophobic rhetoric.

Among the individual components of the nativism index, immigration policy and multiculturalism emerge as the most radicalised dimensions across the Central-Eastern PRR cluster. PiS records 8.75 and 9.16 respectively—close to SNS (9.38/9.40), POT (9.00/9.83) and SOS Romania (9.50/9.44), and just below Fidesz–KDNP (9.78/8.74)—underscoring firm opposition to societal pluralism and alignment with exclusionary nationalist agendas in the region. However, significant variation emerges in other components, particularly nationalism, attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and anti-Islam rhetoric. PiS scores 9.07 on nationalism—comparable to SNS (9.75) and SOS RO (9.70), and just below the maximum values registered by POT (10.00) and Fidesz (10.00). On minority exclusion, PiS (8.13) adopts a moderately exclusionary position, well below the levels recorded by POT (10.00), SNS (9.43), and SOS RO (9.81), and more comparable to MHM (5.17) or Fidesz (5.20).

The most significant differentiation arises in anti-Islam rhetoric, where PiS (7.10) scores lower than most of its regional counterparts. While it exceeds Fidesz (4.00) and DP (3.25), it remains below SOS RO (4.63), POT (6.75), and SNS (6.63), and far from the maximalist levels often observed in Western European PRR

formations. This suggests that, although Islamophobia is present in PiS's discourse, it is not the primary axis of exclusion, nor is it mobilised as intensively as in the case of more civilisationally-oriented actors.

Taken together, the data confirm that PiS's nativist profile is closest to that of Fidesz and SNS, with whom it shares not only a similarly high score on nationalism (PiS 9.07; Fidesz 10.00; SNS 9.75), but also strong opposition to multiculturalism (PiS 9.16; Fidesz 8.74; SNS 9.40) and immigration (PiS 8.75; Fidesz 9.78; SNS 9.38). However, PiS distinguishes itself by adopting a less radical position on ethnic minorities (8.13 vs. SNS 9.43 or SOS RO 9.81), and by eschewing a civilisationally-framed Islamophobia, which features more prominently in parties like POT (6.75) or AUR (9.73).POT and SNS, by contrast, represent a more maximalist expression of radical nativism in the Central and Eastern European context. POT exceeds PiS across nearly all dimensions, including nationalism (10.00 vs. 9.07), minority exclusion (10.00 vs. 8.13), and multiculturalism (9.83 vs. 9.16). Similarly, SNS registers higher scores on nationalism (9.75), minority exclusion (9.43), and multiculturalism (9.40). These parties appear to articulate a more ideologically uncompromising vision of ethno-national identity, with stronger scapegoating elements and a heightened rejection of societal diversity.

In sum, PiS clusters most closely with Fidesz and, to a slightly lesser extent, SNS—forming a distinct Central and Eastern European subpattern of the PRR. This subpattern is defined by exclusionary nationalism and opposition to multiculturalism but tempered by lower levels of Islamophobia and a comparatively less racialised approach to minority exclusion than the region's most radical actors. PiS's nativism thus reflects a sovereignty-based and culturally conservative nationalism, anchored in Catholic traditionalism rather than civilisational antagonism.

Turning to authoritarianism (Table 23), PiS registers an aggregate score of 8.56, and it aligns closely with parties such as Fidesz–KDNP (9.20), POT (9.11), SNS (8.93), SOS Romania (8.81), and DP (9.00)—all of which exhibit consistently high levels of authoritarianism across multiple subdimensions. Among these, Fidesz and POT stand out as the most radical cases, while PiS sits closer to the intermediate pole of this cluster, reflecting a blend of authoritarian traditionalism and institutional embeddedness.

Table 23. Authoritarian indicators for selected PRR parties in Europe

Party	Authoritarianism (Total)	Democratic Freedom and Rights (position)	Civil Liberties vs Law and Order (position)	Religious principles in politics (position)	Support for Women Rights (position)	Support for LGBT+ Rights (position)	Same Sex Marriage (position)
PiS	8.56	8.45	8.31	8.30	7.83	9.20	9.25
DP	9.00	9.12	9.00	9.14	7.86	9.11	9.75
POT	9.11	9.86	10.00	9.57	6.88	10	8.33
SNS	8.93	9.55	8.25	8.82	7.56	9.70	9.71
Fidesz - KDNP	9.20	9.28	9.57	8.82	7.64	9.89	10.00
SOS RO	8.81	9.67	8.86	9.00	7.25	10.00	8.09

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All items are measured on 0–10 scales, as coded in the CHES dataset. Higher values indicate more authoritarian positions—for example, greater scepticism towards democratic rights, stronger preference for law and order over civil liberties, greater religious influence in politics, and more restrictive views on gender equality, LGBT+ rights, and same-sex marriage.

Law and order and democratic rights emerge as the most radicalised dimensions across the group. PiS scores 8.31 on the law-and-order axis and 8.45 on restrictions to democratic rights—figures that place it below DP (9.00 / 9.12), SOS Romania (8.86 / 9.67) and, more distinctly, POT (10.00 / 9.86) and Fidesz (9.57 / 9.28). On law-and-order, PiS is marginally above SNS (8.25), though below SNS on democratic-rights restrictions (9.55). These results indicate a strong preference for coercive authority and scepticism towards liberal-democratic institutions, albeit short of the maximalist thresholds observed among the most radical cases.

Religious traditionalism is a defining feature of PiS's authoritarianism. With 8.30 on the influence of religious principles in politics, PiS ranks below SNS (8.82) and SOS Romania (9.00), and somewhat behind POT (9.57) and DP (9.14). This underscores the party's commitment to Catholic moral conservatism and its instrumentalisation of religion as a pillar of national identity and public policy—marking a contrast with more secular authoritarian actors in Western and Northern Europe.

In relation to gender equality and minority rights, PiS adopts consistently restrictive positions, though variation exists across indicators. On women's rights, PiS (7.83) is more restrictive than POT (6.88) and SOS Romania (7.25). On LGBT+ rights (9.20) and same-sex marriage (9.25), PiS ranks among the most repressive in the dataset, albeit still marginally more moderate than Fidesz (9.89 / 10.00) and POT (10.00 / 8.33). These scores reflect a broader ideological orientation towards moral order, cultural homogeneity and the defence of "traditional values" in the face of perceived liberal threats.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that PiS's authoritarian profile is most closely aligned with that of Fidesz and SNS, sharing high—though not maximal—scores on law and order (Fidesz: 9.57; SNS: 8.25; PiS: 8.31), a strong emphasis on religious traditionalism (Fidesz: 8.82; SNS: 8.82; PiS: 8.30), and deeply conservative positions on LGBT+ rights (Fidesz: 9.89; SNS: 9.70; PiS: 9.20). These parties articulate authoritarianism through an illiberal-conservative frame anchored in national sovereignty, Catholic or Orthodox morality, and a paternalistic view of democratic governance. POT, while sharing similar ideological pillars, adopts a more uncompromising stance, posting the highest values on nearly all indicators (10.00 on law and order and LGBT+ rights; 9.86 on democratic-rights restrictions), signalling a harder-edged authoritarianism less tempered by institutional responsibilities.

By contrast, SOS Romania and DP occupy more hybrid positions: they combine strong law-and-order preferences and anti-LGBT+ stances (SOS: 8.86 / 10.00; DP: 9.00 / 9.11) with slightly more moderate scores on women's rights and democratic-rights scepticism. They illustrate the range of authoritarian profiles within the Central-Eastern PRR, spanning institutionalised illiberalism and more radical anti-liberal populism.

In sum, PiS clusters most closely with Fidesz and SNS, forming part of a Central-Eastern authoritarian subpattern within the PRR. This variant blends nationalism, religious moralism and scepticism of liberal rights, while stopping short of the maximalist repression evident in POT or SOS Romania. PiS thus exemplifies an institutionalised authoritarianism, governing through moral traditionalism and legal conservatism rather than through an outright rupture with democratic norms.

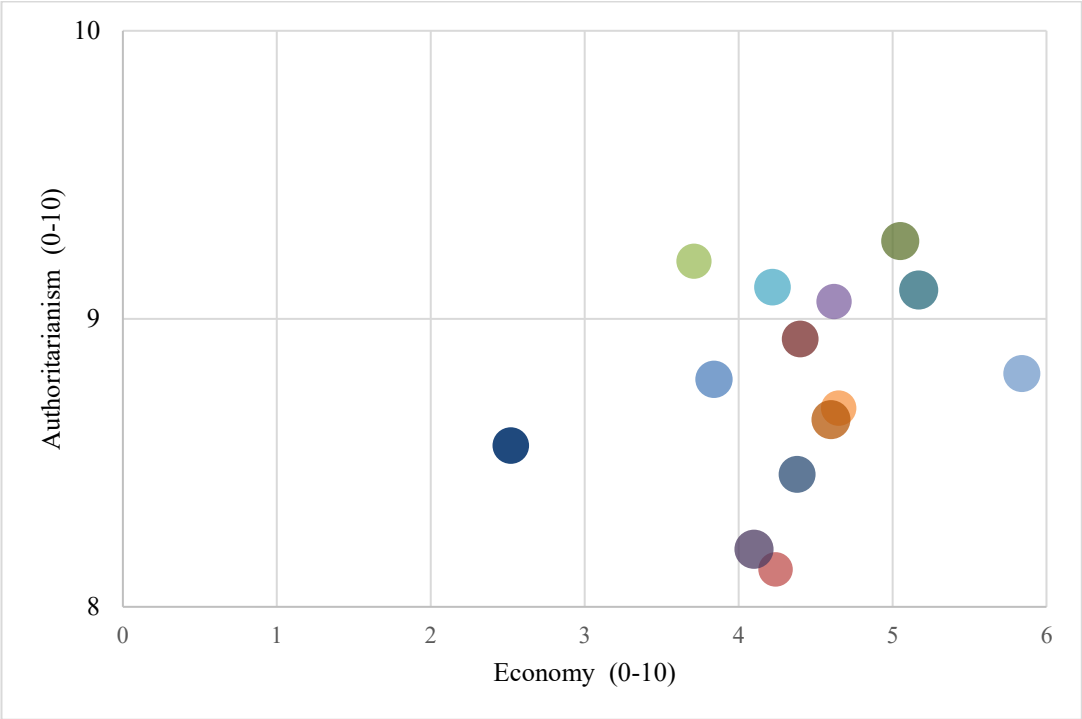
6.2.2.2 Economic orientation: interventionist and redistributive economic profile

On the economic dimension, PiS represent a markedly distinct configuration within the European PRR, emerging as the most economically left-leaning party among all PRR formations included in the CHES 2024 (Rovny et al.,2024).

PiS is situated within the upper-left quadrant of the ideological spectrum, corresponding to what Kitschelt and McGann (1995) defined as the "new winning formula." This cluster reflects the consolidation of illiberal, national-conservative models in Central and Eastern Europe, characterised by a form of welfare chauvinism that fuses authoritarian moral conservatism and exclusionary nationalism with redistributive strategies. These strategies are often deployed to compensate for the structural weakness—or outright collapse—of traditional left-wing parties in the post-communist context. Representative examples of this configuration include Revival (Vazrazhdane) and Velichie in Bulgaria; Fidesz–KDNP and Our Homeland Movement (MHM) in Hungary; the Romanian Party of Young People (POT); Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR); National Alliance (NS) in Lithuania; the Slovak National Party (SNS); Republika in Slovakia; Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) in the Czech Republic; Spartans in Greece; ELAM in Cyprus; and the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE). Collectively, these parties articulate a protectionist and redistributive economic agenda framed in nationalist terms, positioning the state as the defender of native economic interests against both international markets and cosmopolitan elites.

Despite occupying a shared position within the upper-left quadrant of the PRR spectrum, these parties exhibit important internal variation. While all combine authoritarian sociocultural stances with interventionist economic policies, the extent and coherence of their redistributive agendas, degrees of protectionism, and institutional embeddedness differ considerably. Among them (Figure 19), PiS's closest counterparts are Fidesz in Hungary, the Romanian Party of Young People (POT), Revival (Vazrazhdane) in Bulgaria, and SOS Romania. These formations are particularly notable for their sustained emphasis on welfare nationalism, their fusion of moral conservatism with national sovereignty discourses, and their role as dominant or highly institutionalised actors within their respective political system.

Figure 19. Economic and authoritarian positioning of PRR parties in the upper-left quadrant: strategic variants in light of the "winning formulas"



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: The horizontal axis represents parties' economic position (0–10), while the vertical axis captures levels of authoritarianism (0–10). Bubble size indicates the degree of nativism. The intersecting dashed lines correspond to the mean values of economy (≈6.20) and authoritarianism (≈8.01), thereby dividing the plot into four quadrants that highlight different ideological profiles within the European PRR.

Table 24. Economic indicators for selected PRR parties in Europe

Party	Economic left-right	Position on redistribution	Public services vs tax cuts	Deregulation	Protectionism
PiS	2.52	2.61	7.82	3.69	3.71
Fidesz	3.71	5.47	6.80	3.2	7.19
SOS RO	3.76	3.31	5.57	4.25	9.40
Revival	3.84	3.57	4.46	3.5	8.79

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Note: All indicators are measured on 0–10 scales, following CHES coding. Higher values indicate more economically right-wing positions (i.e. lower redistribution, stronger preference for tax cuts over public services, greater support for deregulation, and lower protectionism). The "Economic Left–Right" variable reflects general economic ideology, while the sub-dimensions capture specific policy preferences.

As shown in Table 24, PiS (2.52) and, to a lesser extent, Fidesz (3.71), Revival (3.84), and SOS Romania (3.76), occupy the economic left flank of the European PRR, forming a distinctive interventionist–authoritarian cluster. These parties articulate strong commitments to redistribution and state-led economic protectionism, marking a sharp departure from the neoliberal orientations that characterise formations such as Vox or Konfederacja.

On the redistribution axis, PiS (2.61) emerges as the most committed to state-led income transfers and expansive social spending within the European PRR, reinforcing its identity as a paradigmatic case of welfare chauvinism. Although Fidesz (5.47), SOS Romania (3.31), and Revival (3.57) also favour redistributive policies, PiS's profile is the most ideologically consistent and programmatically embedded. Notably, Revival and SOS Romania adopt a more moderate stance on redistribution, suggesting a selective application of welfare policies rather than a cohesive statist model.

On the public services versus tax cuts indicator, PiS scores 7.82—higher than SOS Romania (5.57), Fidesz (6.80), or Revival (4.46). This result reflects PiS's dual objective of maintaining social legitimacy through public service expansion while simultaneously appealing to business sectors through limited tax relief. Its score signals a pragmatic balance between redistribution and fiscal conservatism, positioning it as more economically centrist than Revival or SOS Romania, whose profiles are more fragmented across dimensions.

In terms of deregulation, PiS (3.69) supports a relatively regulated economy, comparable to SOS Romania (4.25), Revival (3.50), and Fidesz (3.20). All four parties oppose market liberalisation and favour state involvement in strategic sectors, yet PiS again demonstrates a more ideologically consistent profile, combining economic regulation with a coherent national-conservative framework.

Protectionism introduces further differentiation. SOS Romania (9.40) and Revival (8.79) register the highest levels of economic nationalism, while Fidesz (7.19) adopts a moderately protectionist posture. PiS, with a score of 3.71, appears notably less protectionist—suggesting a more defensive rather than offensive economic nationalism, potentially constrained by EU membership obligations or domestic fiscal considerations.

Taken together, the evidence confirms that while PiS, Fidesz, Revival, and SOS Romania are part of the interventionist–authoritarian quadrant of the European PRR, their economic profiles differ in both degree and ideological coherence. Among them, PiS emerges as the most consistently redistributive and economically paternalistic formation, pairing a moderately regulated economic model with targeted welfare expansion. Fidesz, by contrast, blends redistribution with crony capitalism and clientelist state practices, while SOS Romania and Revival present more hybrid configurations—highly protectionist, moderately redistributive, but less programmatically stable. As such, PiS stands out as a paradigmatic case of illiberal welfare nationalism in the post-communist space.

6.2.2.3 Positioning PiS within the European PRR

PiS is firmly positioned within the upper-left quadrant of the European PRR spectrum—a configuration characterised by national-conservative authoritarianism in which illiberal governance, moral traditionalism, and state interventionism prevail over overtly ethno-nationalist or market-liberal logics. PiS articulates its nativism primarily through opposition to multiculturalism, restrictive immigration policy, and a strong nationalist orientation, but it remains less radical in its exclusion of minorities or mobilisation of anti-Islamic sentiment than many of its Central and Eastern European counterparts. In this regard, PiS is most closely aligned with Fidesz–KDNP and, to a lesser extent, the Slovak National Party (SNS)—all of which espouse a sovereignty-driven, culturally conservative nationalism while steering clear of the civilisational or racialised framings typical of actors such as POT.

Authoritarianism constitutes the core ideological anchor of PiS. The party consistently prioritises law-and-order frameworks, curtails liberal-democratic rights, and embeds Catholic moral principles into public policy. Yet, compared to more radical formations such as POT or the upper-end scores recorded by Fidesz, PiS occupies a more intermediate position: illiberal and socially conservative, but with a degree of constraint likely shaped by institutional incumbency and EU-level conditionality. This reflects its dual status as both a radical ideological actor and a pragmatic governing force.

On economic matters, PiS constitutes a notable outlier within the European PRR. It is the most economically left-leaning party in the CHES 2024 (Jolly et al.,2024),

combining a redistributive agenda, regulated capitalism, and welfare chauvinism. In contrast to Western and Southern European PRR parties—such as Vox or Konfederacja—which embrace market liberalism, PiS pursues state-led social expansion to bolster electoral coalitions in a context marked by the decline of the institutional left. Among its regional peers, it is more systematically redistributive than Fidesz, Revival, or SOS Romania, albeit less protectionist than the latter two.

In comparative perspective, PiS exemplifies the interventionist–authoritarian variant of the PRR: combining high levels of authoritarianism, strong but non-maximal nativism, and a left-leaning political economy. Its closest analogue is Fidesz, with which it shares a commitment to sovereignty, Catholic traditionalism, illiberal statecraft, and economic intervention. However, while Fidesz leans more heavily into protectionism and engages in clientelist practices, PiS articulates a more ideologically consistent and paternalistic model of welfare statism. SNS occupies a more ideologically proximate position on nationalism and moral traditionalism, though it adopts a more radical stance on minority exclusion. At the more uncompromising end of this quadrant, parties such as POT and SOS Romania represent harder-edged variants, marked by higher ceilings on authoritarian repression, maximalist nativism, and—in the case of SOS—aggressive economic protectionism.

Substantively, PiS exemplifies a regionally embedded path of PRR development in post-communist Europe: one of institutionalised illiberalism, where governance is shaped by moral conservatism, nationalist welfare logics, and pragmatic constraints. Rather than pursuing unrestrained authoritarianism or doctrinaire neoliberalism, PiS mobilises selective redistribution and cultural traditionalism to sustain electoral dominance and assert ideological distinction. Its trajectory underscores how historical legacies, church–state entanglements, and external conditionalities structure the strategic repertoires of PRR actors in the region, producing a distinctive—but internally variegated—cluster within the broader European PRR family.

6.3 Conclusion: regional variants and ideological divergence within the European PRR

This chapter has demonstrated the profound ideological, programmatic, and institutional heterogeneity that characterises the European PRR. While these parties share a core ideological commitment to nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, their configurations vary significantly across regions—particularly in terms of economic orientation, cultural framing, and political strategy. The cases of Vox in Southern Europe and PiS in Central and Eastern Europe offer two illustrative—and in many respects contrasting—variants of contemporary PRR politics, shaped by distinct national contexts and regional trajectories.

Vox exemplifies a Southern European liberal–authoritarian subvariant of the PRR. It combines uncompromising nativism, Catholic-traditionalist values, and a strong emphasis on law and order, with an economically neoliberal programme. With one of the highest scores on the economic left–right axis, Vox promotes tax cuts, deregulation, and fiscal orthodoxy—placing it at the vanguard of market-liberal PRR formations, alongside Konfederacja. However, this liberalism is moderated by selective protectionist measures, particularly in relation to strategic sectors—a nuance reflecting the structure of the Spanish economy and broader Iberian sensitivities. Culturally, Vox articulates exclusion through a religious-Hispanist lens, rather than civilisational or racialised discourses, aligning it more closely with Chega and Brothers of Italy than with the more secular and ethnonationalist models of the North.

By contrast, PiS represents a Central and Eastern European interventionist–authoritarian variant, characterised by exclusionary nationalism, Catholic moral conservatism, and an economically redistributive agenda. PiS stands out as the most economically left-leaning PRR party in the CHES 2024 dataset, (Jolly et al.,2024), advocating a consistent model of welfare chauvinism anchored in statist, paternalistic intervention. This approach has proven electorally effective in a post-communist context marked by the structural weakness of the traditional left. While PiS shares Vox's authoritarian emphasis on sovereignty, moral order, and institutional hierarchy, it adopts comparatively less radical stances on minority exclusion and Islamophobia, framing exclusion instead through culturally conservative and sovereigntist narratives. Its governing role within the EU

institutional framework further constrains its illiberal project, embedding it in a logic of strategic moderation rather than open rupture.

Together, these cases reveal the pluralism of the PRR across Europe. Although all PRR parties advance exclusionary visions of identity and belonging, they diverge sharply in their economic models, degrees of authoritarianism, and ideological justifications. This variation is further reflected in their fragmented affiliations at the European level: PiS remains a core member of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), while Vox has joined the newly created Patriots for Europe group. Meanwhile, ideologically proximate parties—such as Reconquête, Konfederacja, and Chega—are dispersed across the Patriots, ECR, and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group, underscoring the institutional disarticulation of the PRR within the European Parliament.

In sum, while Vox and PiS belong to the same political family, their ideological configurations, programmatic trajectories, and regional embeddedness diverge significantly. Vox articulates a Southern European variant rooted in market liberalism, moral conservatism, and cultural exclusion, while PiS embodies a post-communist model centred on economic nationalism, religious authoritarianism, and illiberal governance. Their contrasting paths reinforce the analytical value of distinguishing between regional subtypes within the PRR and highlight the need for multidimensional frameworks that integrate ideology, institutional context, and political economy. More broadly, the comparison underscores the importance of regionalised, context-sensitive approaches to the study of the PRR in Europe—an approach advanced throughout this dissertation.

Chapter 7. Conclusions

7.1 Overall review of the study

This dissertation has sought to contribute to the growing field of research on the PRR by undertaking a comparative study of two of its most significant, yet underexplored, representatives: Vox in Spain and PiS in Poland. The study has been guided by the recognition that, although PRR parties are often treated as ideologically uniform across national borders, there is considerable intra-family variation that warrants systematic investigation. Through the development of a robust conceptual framework, the use of original empirical data, and the adoption of a comparative case study design, this research has aimed to both clarify the conceptual contours of the PRR and map its regional and national differentiations.

At the conceptual level, the dissertation offers a refined and operational definition of the PRR, anchored in the triadic ideological core of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, as proposed by Cas Mudde (2007). This framework is further enriched by the inclusion of additional ideological dimensions—notably Euroscepticism, ruralism, climate scepticism, and diverging economic models—which capture the complexity of PRR party profiles beyond their shared foundations. In doing so, the study addresses longstanding terminological ambiguities in the literature and proposes a more nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of the PRR phenomenon.

Empirically, the dissertation contributes to the field through a comparative analysis of Vox and PiS, two parties that exemplify regionally embedded variants of the PRR. While both formations share key ideological traits, they diverge significantly in terms of their historical legacies, strategic trajectories, institutional positioning, and programmatic content. In tracing these divergent paths, the study illustrates how national contexts, authoritarian legacies, and party system dynamics shape the evolution and ideological configuration of PRR actors.

Methodologically, the research develops a replicable analytical framework that combines qualitative discourse analysis, programme evaluation, and quantitative ideological mapping based on the CHES (Jolly et al. 2022, Rovny et al., 2024). This integrated approach allows for the triangulation of discourse, programme, and expert-coded data, and introduces a comparative visualisation model using multi-

axis scatterplots and quadrant typologies. These tools facilitate the systematic positioning of PRR parties along ideological and economic dimensions, while also accounting for regional patterns and internal variation within the party family.

Taken together, the analysis indicates that the PRR is best understood as heterogeneous, not monolithic. The following section details the empirical findings that substantiate this claim.

7.2 Main Findings

Returning to the central objective outlined in the introduction of this doctoral dissertation, the primary aim of this research has been to conduct a comparative analysis of the PRR in Spain and Poland, through the case studies of Vox and PiS. As established in the working hypotheses, the study departed from the assumption that both parties belong to the same political family—the European PRR—and therefore share a set of core ideological features. However, it was also hypothesised that, despite these commonalities, the two formations exhibit significantly divergent ideological configurations, discursive strategies, and programmatic agendas, largely shaped by their respective national contexts, authoritarian legacies, party-system dynamics, and political opportunity structures. As a result, within the broader PRR party family, Vox and PiS occupy distinct positions that reflect emerging regional subtypes.

At the broader level of analysis, this research has repeatedly demonstrated both the heterogeneity and the growing relevance and normalisation of the PRR in Europe. As Cas Mudde (2019) notes, there is a recurring tendency to treat the PRR as if it were a homogeneous entity, consistent across time and space. The findings of this study—particularly through the comparative lens employed—reveal that intra-family differences are as substantial as the similarities. PRR parties diverge markedly in electoral performance, historical legacies, leadership, organisational structure, political salience, and even in their affiliation to different political groups within the European Parliament.

Nonetheless, one element clearly unites these formations—beyond their shared commitment to nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—namely, their centrality in contemporary European politics. At both national and EU levels, the PRR has become a structurally embedded and electorally potent actor. Over the past four decades, the PRR has undergone a dramatic expansion, increasing its share of the

European vote from approximately 4% in 1985 to nearly 25% in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Moreover, the PRR is no longer confined to the political margins: in more than a dozen European countries, these parties are in government, support governing coalitions, or lead opposition forces.

This normalisation has coincided with broader discursive and programmatic shift with within mainstream politics. Conventional parties place greater emphasis on issues long championed by the PRR—immigration, national identity, and law and order—while adopting more restrictive positions in these domains. The PRR is thus not only shaping electoral outcomes but also reshaping the contours of the political mainstream.

Heterogeneity is central analytical concern here, essential to understanding PRR parties- especially at the national level. While PRR formations share a core ideological triad—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—they are far from ideologically uniform. On the contrary, diversity manifests across ideological, economic, discursive, electoral, organisational, and geographical dimensions

Drawing on data from the CHES (Jolly et al. 2024), the study classifies PRR parties by ideological profile (nativism, authoritarianism, and populism)—their economic orientation, interpreted through Kitschelt and McGann's 'winning formulas' framework, and broader geographical patterns (see Table 25). This internal heterogeneity—or fragmentation—underscores the adaptability of the PRR to diverse national contexts and highlights the difficulties of supranational coordination within the party family. Despite common roots, these parties remain nationally embedded actors with diverging ideological trajectories and strategic priorities. Yet, paradoxically, they continue to shape political agendas across the continent, particularly on immigration, identity, sovereignty, and social policy.

Table 25. Dimensions of the heterogeneity within the European PRR

Dimension	Description	Representative Parties
Ideological Profile		
Hardline nativist–authoritarian	Parties situated at the radical core of the PRR family, combining exclusionary ethno-nationalism with pronounced authoritarianism.	Vox, FPÖ, Chega, FdI, Lega, ELAM, Konfederacja
Illiberal conservatives with strong state control	Parties marked by authoritarian governance, moral traditionalism, and sovereignty-driven agendas, often rooted in national-conservative or post-communist legacies.	PiS, Fidesz, AUR, SNS
Liberal–nativist formations	Parties espousing hardline anti-immigration and nativist discourses while exhibiting relatively moderate or secular stances on moral and cultural issues.	RN, SD, AfD, VB, PVV
Hybrid or de-radicalised parties	Parties occupying the ideological margins of the PRR, either undergoing programmatic moderation or presenting fluid, transitional profiles.	Jobbik, Resni.ca, MCG
Economic Orientation		
Liberal authoritarian (Old winning formula)	Economically liberal parties advocating deregulation, low taxation, and reduced state intervention, combined with authoritarian positions on order, identity, and morality.	Vox, Konfederacja, Chega, REC, FPÖ
Authoritarian–interventionist (New winning formula)	Parties combining authoritarian cultural appeals with redistributive and protectionist economic policies, often articulated through welfare chauvinism.	PiS, Fidesz, SNS, AUR
Liberal–nativist	Market-oriented formations with strong exclusionary discourses, but comparatively weaker authoritarian or moral-conservative commitments.	RN, SD, DPP, Reform UK
Transitional or hybrid profiles	Parties characterised by programmatic ambivalence or ideological de-radicalisation, with positions that straddle PRR and mainstream frameworks.	Jobbik, MECh, Resni.ca
Geographical Patterns		

Southern & Western Europe	Predominantly characterised by liberal–authoritarian PRR variants, often combining neoliberal economics with authoritarian nationalism.	Vox, Chega, FdI
Central & Eastern Europe	Dominated by authoritarian–interventionist PRR models rooted in national-conservative traditions and statist redistribution.	PiS, Fidesz, AUR
Northern & Western Europe	Tend to exhibit liberal–nativist profiles, with strong anti-immigration stances but less emphasis on religious or moral authoritarianism.	RN, VB, SD
Peripheral or transitional zones	Encompass hybrid or evolving parties, often positioned on the margins of the PRR or undergoing moderation trajectories.	Jobbik, MCG

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Rovny et al. (2024).

Secondly, shifting to a more micro-level perspective focused on the selected comparative case studies, and building on the preceding findings on PRR heterogeneity, it can be conclusively affirmed that Vox and PiS occupy distinct and non-equivalent positions within the European PRR. They represent differentiated variants shaped by national histories, authoritarian legacies, and party-system dynamics.

In Spain, the late emergence of Vox must be situated within the legacy of the Franco dictatorship and the country's distinctive the post-authoritarian consensus. Since the 1978 democratic transition, the party system has been grounded in a consensus-driven restoration that prioritised institutional stability, moderation, and territorial integrity. For nearly four decades, this configuration produced low party fragmentation and alternating single-party governments led by the PSOE or the PP, with regionalist parties playing pivotal but secondary roles. The broad-church hegemony of the People's Party absorbed much of the post-authoritarian conservative spectrum, effectively closing the space to its right and delaying the rise of a radical right challenger.

From the late 2000s, a series of cumulative shocks progressively eroded this institutional architecture. The global financial crisis, high-profile corruption scandals, and the mobilisation of the 15-M movement re-legitimised anti-elite and democratic-renewal narratives. The 2017–2018 Catalan constitutional crisis

reactivated the territorial cleavage and reframed national identity as a high-salience valence issue. Together, these developments led to the collapse of the bipartisan order in 2015, triggering heightened fragmentation and ideological polarisation. The shift from stable single-party executives to fragile coalition governments reconfigured the political opportunity structure, especially on the right. As the PP's gatekeeping capacity weakened and issues such as law and order, national unity, and cultural values regained prominence, barriers to entry for a PRR actor like Vox were substantially lowered.

By contrast, Poland's post-1989 transformation began with extreme party fragmentation under a permissive electoral system, followed by 1993 reforms introducing thresholds and the d'Hondt formula. These changes reduced fragmentation but increased disproportionality. The 1990s nonetheless remained marked by volatility, short-lived coalitions, and weak party anchorage. From the early 2000s, the system reorganised around parties stemming from the post-Solidarity camp, producing a bipolar tendency dominated by PiS and PO, albeit within a multiparty context. Between 2005 and 2023, the two largest parties significantly increased their dominance at national and regional levels, though smaller parties retained relevance.

This consolidation coexisted with persistent territorial asymmetries—particularly the entrenched urban–rural divide—and deepening value polarisation between liberal-European and conservative-sovereigntist visions. Poland's institutional architecture—characterised by disproportionality, a presidency with veto powers, and the capacity to reform institutions via ordinary legislation—lowered barriers to concentrated executive power. From 2015, PiS leveraged this structure to implement an ambitious process of state transformation, reshaping the judiciary, civil service, media, and electoral rules. This process resulted in a conflictual and high-stakes trajectory of democratic backsliding with competitive authoritarian tendencies that persisted beyond the 2023 elections, even as presidential vetoes hindered institutional backsliding.

These contrasting trajectories illustrate divergent PRR configurations, shaped by distinct historical and structural factors. In Spain, the delayed rise of the PRR is attributable to the enduring stigma of Francoism, the PP's gatekeeping role, and the comparatively late politicisation of immigration and national identity. In Poland, by

contrast, the early consolidation of a culturally conservative PRR actor was facilitated by the weakness of the post-communist left, the collapse of right-wing alternatives (such as AWS, Samoobrona, and LPR), and enduring nationalist narratives rooted in anti-communism and Catholic identity.

Accordingly, Vox emerged as an electoral insurgent, mobilising through polarising discourse in a context shaped by post-materialist cleavages and cultural grievances. PiS, by contrast, constructed its project from within the institutional mainstream, capitalising on material insecurities, moral polarisation, and state-building narratives to consolidate executive-led authoritarian governance.

The temporal logic of party formation further distinguishes Vox from PiS. Vox was established in 2013 as a splinter from the PP's most conservative faction, motivated by dissatisfaction with the PP's perceived centrism and its approach to Catalan separatism, gender politics, and immigration. From its inception—despite rejecting the label—it was widely identified with the PRR, combining authoritarianism, nativism, and populism. Its discourse, shaped by Spanish nationalism, anti-feminism, and anti-immigration rhetoric, reflected a broader reaction against liberal-progressive norms. However, the party lacked institutional representation until it won 12 seats in the 2018 Andalusian elections, held in the wake of the 2017 Catalan independence crisis and the no-confidence vote that brought Pedro Sánchez to power following the Gürtel case. This sequence of events deepened public disillusionment with mainstream parties, opening space for challengers such as Vox.

PiS underwent a gradual and endogenous process of radicalisation. Emerging from a split within the post-Solidarity camp, it was initially framed as a centre-right party aligned with the post-1989 democratic consensus. Unlike Vox, PiS was not an outsider but positioned itself as the heir to the 1990s state-building project. It capitalised on the demise of the post-Solidarity right—especially the collapse of AWS—and consolidated its position as a dominant conservative force. From the outset, it occupied a central pole in a cleavage structure defined by moral and sovereigntist antagonisms. PiS's political opportunity structure did not stem from a single rupture but from strategic repositioning, ideological realignment, and the mobilisation of national trauma—particularly following the 2010 Smolensk air crash. Its transformation into a populist-authoritarian force evolved over time. The

first PiS-led government (2005–2007) marked the beginning of this shift, as the party absorbed elements from more radical actors. During its opposition years (2007–2015), it intensified national-populist rhetoric, portraying itself as the defender of national dignity against a liberal, cosmopolitan elite; the Smolensk tragedy reinforced this identity, anchoring the party in a narrative of national martyrdom. This ideological evolution culminated in PiS's uninterrupted rule from 2015 to 2023, when it embedded its project gradually and institutionally through programmatic continuity and systemic reform.

These divergent paths exemplify two ideal-type models of PRR development: exogenous, crisis-induced radicalism (Vox) versus endogenous, elite-driven authoritarian consolidation (PiS). Vox's radicalisation was externally triggered and front-loaded, while PiS's was gradual, strategic, and aimed at restructuring democratic institutions.

The contrast extends to institutional consolidation. Vox's growth has been electorally swift but structurally fragile. It has entered regional governments as a junior partner to the PP but lacks national governing experience. Its institutional base remains weak, dependent on coalition dynamics, electoral volatility, and symbolic mobilisation. Since 2023, the party's support has declined, facing competition from more radical actors such as SALF, prompting internal tensions and a hardening of its ideological stance. PiS, by contrast, achieved deep institutional consolidation through majority rule. Between 2015 and 2023, it controlled both executive and legislature, enabling wide-ranging reforms in the judiciary, media, and education. This consolidation was not merely electoral but systemic: PiS embedded its agenda within state institutions, marginalising opposition and institutionalising a form of populist authoritarian governance.

There is, therefore, no 'ideal type' of PRR formation. Rather, as this study confirms, the ideological articulation, political trajectory, and institutional consolidation of PRR parties are shaped by the structural features of national political systems, the nature of dominant cleavages, and the legacies of authoritarianism and democratic transition.

Vox and PiS constitute consolidated expressions of the PRR in Europe, coherently articulating its core ideological pillars—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. During the period under analysis, both parties underwent processes of

radicalisation, though the intensity and configuration of each dimension vary. The nativist dimension is more pronounced in Vox, whereas authoritarianism is particularly dominant in PiS.

Both parties promote exclusionary national identities centred on cultural and ethnic homogeneity, yet their articulations diverge. Vox advances a unitary, centralised vision grounded in Hispanism, Catholic civilisational values, and elements of imperial nostalgia. Spanish identity is anchored in language, monarchy, and the indivisibility of the nation. PiS constructs a more ethnically prescriptive and morally infused conception of Polishness—defined by ancestry, Catholicism, and a history of collective suffering. The nation is imagined as a virtuous moral community whose cohesion must be protected against internal and external threats.

Although both advocate restrictive immigration policies, their justifications differ. Vox favours Latin American migrants, citing cultural affinity, and frames Muslim immigration as a civilisational threat. PiS adopts a more uniformly exclusionary approach, especially towards non-European and Muslim-majority populations, while justifying the exception of Ukrainian refugees on ethno-religious and geopolitical grounds. In essence, Vox promotes a civilisational and integrative nativism, whereas PiS espouses a moralised ethno-nationalism shaped by grievance and religious orthodoxy.

Authoritarianism is central to both, albeit in distinct forms. Vox's authoritarianism is primarily discursive and security-oriented, targeting migrants and progressive movements through law-and-order rhetoric aimed at defending sovereignty. It supports punitive measures—harsher sentencing, militarised borders—but does not seek structural reform of state institutions. PiS, by contrast, has pursued assertive state-transformational authoritarianism. During its time in power (2015–2023), it eroded judicial independence, weakened institutional checks, and consolidated executive power—framing these actions as the restoration of national sovereignty and the dismantling of the post-communist liberal order.

Both also engage in socio-cultural authoritarianism, though with distinct registers. Vox promotes a traditionalist agenda opposing abortion, euthanasia, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights, framed through civilisational tropes and appeals to natural order. It often stigmatises groups such as unaccompanied migrant minors (MENAs), feminists, and LGBTQ+ communities. Its engagement with Catholicism is

pragmatic and largely symbolic. PiS, by contrast, embeds cultural conservatism within a religious-nationalist framework grounded in Catholic social doctrine and closely aligned with ecclesiastical institutions. Policies such as near-total abortion bans and 'LGBT-free zones' exemplify a theologically infused authoritarianism in which Catholic morality is intrinsic to national identity.

Populism constitutes another major point of divergence. In Vox, populism is secondary and instrumental—subordinated to nationalism—and used primarily to intensify polarisation and delegitimise adversaries. Since 2020, Vox has employed binary rhetoric opposing the 'real Spain' to a corrupt political caste, represented by the Sánchez government. Yet it does not construct a sustained narrative of popular sovereignty; 'the people' are conflated with the Spanish nation rather than framed as a politically mobilised actor. Populist motifs such as 'common sense' or the 'Spain that rises early' are ultimately subsumed into nationalist discourse. Even initiatives like the Solidaridad trade union are framed with exclusionary criteria that privilege native-born citizens. In contrast, populism constitutes the ideological core of PiS's project. From its inception, PiS framed Poland's post-1989 liberal transformation as a betrayal by a corrupt elite aligned with globalist and post-communist forces, constructing a vertical antagonism between a virtuous, patriotic, Catholic people and a cosmopolitan, morally decadent elite. This populism is materially embedded: redistributive policies such as child allowances, pension increases, and wage hikes seek to restore dignity and political agency to marginalised citizens. PiS's populism is thus institutionalised, moralised, and materially grounded—forming the foundation of a comprehensive regime-transformational project.

These differences are shaped by each party's institutional positioning. PiS has held national office for extended periods—particularly between 2015 and 2023—enabling the consolidation of its ideological agenda through state institutions. Vox, in contrast, has remained in opposition at the national level, limiting its policy-implementation capacity but preserving ideological purity. This distinction between incumbency and opposition is crucial to understanding their differential consolidation.

Beyond the PRR core, both parties articulate three complementary ideological pillars: Euroscepticism, ruralism, and climate scepticism—but in divergent ways.

On the European Union, PiS portrays Brussels as a neo-colonial threat to sovereignty—especially regarding judicial reform and minority rights—whereas Vox criticises the EU primarily as a transmitter of globalist and progressive values. Differences in climate and rural narratives are also telling. Vox initially ignored climate change and now downplays its severity, attributing responsibility to actors such as China or the EU; climate policy is framed as an ideological tool used by urban elites to punish rural Spain. This discourse feeds into the symbolic revalorisation of the *España vaciada*, depicted as both the heartland of national identity and a victim of globalist agendas. Vox's ruralism remains largely discursive—focused on cultural signifiers such as bullfighting and opposition to environmental regulation—without substantive redistributive action. PiS, by contrast, articulates a deeply institutionalised ruralism rooted in its traditional support base in conservative and economically marginalised eastern and south-eastern Poland. The countryside is both an electoral stronghold and a repository of national identity. PiS frames rural voters as custodians of Polishness—Catholic, familial, and patriotic—and actively supports them through subsidies for small farmers, fuel tax exemptions, and protectionist policies such as the Ukrainian grain import ban. While not denying climate change outright, PiS adopts an obstructionist stance, opposing EU frameworks in the name of energy security and national autonomy.

These divergences extend to economic policy. Vox embodies a market-liberal, identity-conservative variant of the PRR, aligning with the 'old winning formula' (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995) and echoing early iterations of the Front National or Lega Nord. Its platform emphasises deregulation, tax cuts, and a minimalist welfare state—except in areas such as natality policy. PiS, by contrast, exemplifies the 'new winning formula': combining state interventionism, redistribution, and conservative values. Its expansion of social programmes forms the backbone of its nationalist-populist governance model. Fiscal policy illustrates this contrast. Vox advocates lower taxes and reduced bureaucracy, while PiS expanded fiscal capacity to fund welfare measures such as the 13th and 14th pensions, minimum-wage increases, and Family 500+. Labour policy follows a similar pattern: Vox promotes flexibility and deregulation, whereas PiS favours strengthened wage protections. Vox's rhetoric of representing the working class lacks concrete programmatic

backing, whereas PiS has built a durable alliance with rural and working-class voters through material support.

These contrasts reflect national specificities and position Vox and PiS differently within the broader European PRR spectrum. Vox occupies the upper-right quadrant of the ideological map: strongly nativist, authoritarian, and economically neoliberal. It aligns with actors such as Chega (Portugal) and Brothers of Italy, forming part of a Southern European liberal–authoritarian subvariant. PiS, in contrast, is situated in the upper-left quadrant: morally conservative, economically interventionist, and structurally authoritarian. It represents a Central-Eastern European model rooted in post-communist legacies and national-Catholic conservatism.

Divergence is also evident in European parliamentary alignments. Although both parties were members of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, the 2024 elections marked a strategic split. Vox joined the new Patriots for Europe alliance alongside parties such as Fidesz, aiming to enhance its influence. PiS opted to remain in ECR, distancing itself from Orbán over pro-Russian sympathies and prioritising leadership roles within the group. Despite this divergence, both parties maintain strong ideological affinities, reflected in mutual endorsements and similar discursive frames. This transnational alignment is further consolidated through ongoing cooperation in transnational PRR arenas. Vox's 'Viva' events—designed to mobilise its base, consolidate its message, and strengthen international links—regularly feature key PRR leaders, including prominent PiS figures such as Jarosław Kaczyński and Mateusz Morawiecki. These appearances underscore ideological proximity even as the parties operate within distinct EP groupings.

In sum, this dissertation confirms the initial hypotheses and provides a comprehensive response to the research questions posed in the introduction. It demonstrates that, while Vox and PiS belong to the same PRR family, they represent distinct, nationally embedded variants shaped by historical legacies, party-system dynamics, and political opportunity structures. Drawing on a robust conceptual framework, empirical data from CHES 2024 (Rovny et al. 2024),, and original comparative analysis, the study achieves its six stated objectives: refining the operational definition of the PRR; tracing national trajectories of emergence and radicalisation; analysing the articulation of nativism, authoritarianism, and

populism; exploring additional dimensions such as Euroscepticism, ruralism, and climate scepticism; contrasting their economic models through the 'winning formulas'; and situating both parties within the broader European PRR landscape. In doing so, it contributes to the comparative understanding of PRR politics in Spain and Poland and to the broader academic debate on heterogeneity, normalisation, and regional differentiation within the radical right across Europe. Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for regionally grounded and historically sensitive approaches in PRR scholarship. While Vox and PiS share a common ideological core, their divergent trajectories, programmatic priorities, and institutional configurations reveal the limits of generalisation; highlighting these contextual specificities advances a more nuanced and multidimensional framework for understanding radical right politics in Europe.

7.3 Main limitations

As with any empirical and comparative research, this dissertation presents a series of methodological, analytical, and documentary limitations that merit explicit recognition. Acknowledging these limitations does not diminish the value of the findings obtained; rather, it serves to delineate the scope of the research and to identify potential avenues for future enquiry. The main limitations identified during the development of this study are outlined below.

1. Reliance on Secondary Expert-Based Data: CHES

One of the core empirical pillars of this dissertation is the CHES (Jolly et al. 2022, 2024), which provides a systematic assessment of political parties' ideological and programmatic positions across multiple dimensions. CHES data are well established within the field of comparative politics and represent one of the most widely used tools for party classification at the European level. In this study, CHES has been instrumental in constructing the ideological profiles of Vox and PiS, particularly in relation to their core dimensions—thereby enabling their systematic comparison. In addition, CHES 2024 (Rovny et al. 2024), data have been used to identify and map the ideological positioning of other parties belonging to the Populist PRR family across Europe.

Nevertheless, the use of expert-coded data inevitably entails certain methodological limitations that must be acknowledged. First, CHES captures the perceptions of academic experts regarding party positions, rather than relying directly on primary sources such as party manifestos, parliamentary behaviour, or implemented policy. While expert assessments often correlate with alternative data sources, they remain subjective interpretations, shaped by the experts' academic knowledge, media exposure, and understanding of the broader political context.

Second, the interpretive nature of expert coding becomes particularly salient in the case of recent or ideologically fluid parties, such as Vox. The party's rapid evolution and programmatic shifts may result in discrepancies between perceived ideological positioning and actual content. Furthermore, in cases where parties have limited academic visibility—as was the case with PiS in its early stages—the pool of available experts may be reduced or skewed, potentially affecting the reliability and internal consistency of the codings.

In light of these considerations, the findings derived from CHES 2024 (Rovny et al. 2024), should be understood as indicative rather than definitive. However, when used critically and combined with in-depth qualitative knowledge of the cases—as is the approach taken in this dissertation—CHES remains a powerful instrument for identifying broad ideological trends and facilitating structured comparison across political parties.

2. The Two-Case Study Design

This research adopts a comparative design based on two case studies, which enables an in-depth analysis of the ideological, programmatic, and institutional trajectories of each party within its respective national context. This approach is fully justified given the objectives of the study, as both cases—Vox in Spain and PiS in Poland—represent contrasting examples of parties belonging to the same political family, while being embedded in different geopolitical regions, political systems, and historical traditions. Their direct comparison has allowed for a detailed exploration of the interaction between national structures, authoritarian legacies, and strategies of institutionalisation.

However, a design focused exclusively on two cases also entails inherent limitations in terms of external validity and generalisability. As the study does not include a broader sample of parties from across the European PRR spectrum—beyond occasional references used to situate Vox and PiS within the wider PRR family—the patterns observed in these two cases cannot be automatically extrapolated to the entirety of the party family.

In particular, the inclusion of additional cases—such as Chega in Portugal (as a comparator for Vox) or Fidesz in Hungary (as a comparator for PiS)—could have enabled a more nuanced assessment of the hypothesis regarding the existence of regional subtypes within the PRR. A broader case selection would also have allowed for the identification of both convergences and divergences across different political and institutional environments, potentially reinforcing or challenging the typological insights developed in this dissertation.

In short, while the two-case comparative design has proven appropriate for achieving the specific objectives of this research, the findings should be interpreted as analytically grounded but empirically bounded. Future studies could build on this work by expanding towards multi-case comparative designs, thereby contributing

to the consolidation of regional PRR typologies and refining our understanding of the structural and ideational factors that account for the variation within the radical right across Europe.

3. Limited Access to Sources in the Case of PiS's Early Development

A further limitation of this research—particularly relevant to the case study of PiS—concerns the difficulty in accessing systematic and verifiable information on the party's early ideological development, foundational positioning, and programmatic evolution during its formative years. While PiS has received growing academic and media attention since returning to power in 2015—especially in relation to its tensions with the European Union, its authoritarian tendencies, and its erosion of liberal democratic norms—the period preceding this hegemonic phase (2001–2014) remains relatively underexplored due to two key constraints: limited availability of sources in English and a lack of early academic and media coverage when the party was still operating as a traditional conservative actor.

Firstly, there is a significant bibliographic asymmetry between the post-2015 literature on PiS and the earlier academic work analysing its initial ideological trajectory. The vast majority of studies concentrate on the period in which PiS exercised dominant executive power (2015–2023), when its democratic backsliding became more visible and international scrutiny intensified. This chronological focus has shaped the dominant interpretative frameworks, while leaving relatively unexamined the party's earlier phase—when it remained closer to the post-transition liberal–conservative consensus and had not yet consolidated its current populist-authoritarian identity.

Secondly, much of the relevant documentation on PiS's early development—including manifestos, founding speeches, interviews, electoral programmes, academic literature, and press coverage—is available exclusively in Polish. This language barrier restricts access to both primary and secondary sources for researchers who do not read Polish, thereby limiting the capacity for direct, in-depth analysis of crucial aspects of the party's ideological formation. While official translations, English-language summaries, and secondary analyses have been used throughout this dissertation, this reliance introduces a degree of selectivity in the sources consulted, which may affect the overall comprehensiveness of the study.

Therefore, although this thesis succeeds in offering a coherent and comparative analysis of PiS within the broader framework of the PRR, it is important to acknowledge that this analysis has been shaped by linguistic, chronological, and documentary constraints, which have complicated the full reconstruction of the party's ideological evolution. This limitation reinforces the need to promote greater multilingual academic production and to support the development of comparative databases that include systematically translated and accessible materials. Such initiatives are essential to facilitate the robust study of non-Anglophone parties in regional contexts such as Central and Eastern Europe.

4. The Dynamic and Evolving Nature of the Case Studies

At the time of writing this dissertation, the political status of the two parties under study differed significantly from their current situation. Vox, at that point, had only recently undergone a process of political institutionalisation, while PiS was still in office as the governing party in Poland. Since then, the context surrounding both formations has shifted substantially, with important implications for their ideological trajectories and strategic positioning.

In the case of Vox, the past year has been marked by a process of discursive recomposition and radicalisation, as well as internal reorganisation. This has occurred in the wake of electoral setbacks, the emergence of new far-right competitors such as SALF, and increasing competition from the PP, which has adopted a more hard-line rhetoric in order to attract segments of the Vox electorate and consolidate a governing majority. Additionally, Vox has sought to enhance its international profile, positioning itself as a strategic ally in the new far-right constellation shaped by the rise of figures such as Javier Milei in Argentina and the potential return of Donald Trump to the US presidency. These dynamics have triggered important organisational changes and a hardening of the party's discourse, suggesting that the ideological profile analysed in this dissertation may not remain stable in future stages of the Spanish electoral cycle.

In the case of PiS, the loss of executive power following the 2023 parliamentary elections has produced a new institutional scenario. While the party still holds the presidency and retains a significant territorial and electoral base, it no longer exercises full control over the government. This shift may limit its capacity to implement its authoritarian agenda or maintain the same level of discursive

dominance from opposition. The change in institutional status—from incumbency to opposition—may affect both the intensity of its populism and its ability to mobilise the state apparatus, two features central to its classification as a radical right populist party with an authoritarian–interventionist profile.

In this regard, the present dissertation constitutes an analytical snapshot of both parties at a specific point in time—between 2001 and 2024 in the case of PiS, and between 2013 and 2024 in the case of Vox. As such, the analysis inevitably entails a freezing of ongoing political processes. The comparative framework has been constructed on the basis of discourses, programmes, empirical data, and indicators available up to spring 2024. However, these may change significantly depending on forthcoming electoral, institutional, or strategic developments.

This highlights the importance of longitudinal follow-up research aimed at tracking the evolution, consolidation, or transformation of the ideological profiles of Vox and PiS. Such research would allow for the re-evaluation of whether the trajectories identified in this dissertation remain consistent, undergo moderation, or shift towards further radicalisation in the future.

5. Absence of Systematic Analysis of Electoral Behaviour

Another important limitation of this research lies in the lack of an empirical and systematic analysis of the social and electoral bases of support for Vox and PiS. While this dissertation offers a comprehensive exploration of the ideological, discursive, and programmatic frameworks of both parties, as well as their institutional trajectories, it does not incorporate a quantitative assessment of their electorates, nor of the underlying socio-demographic dynamics that sustain their expansion and consolidation.

This omission has several analytical implications. First, it prevents an evaluation of the extent to which the ideological profiles identified—such as Vox's civilisational nativism or PiS's redistributive populism—are reflected in differentiated voting patterns, for instance in terms of class, gender, age, education level, or territorial distribution. The existing literature on the PRR has shown that these parties often build hybrid electoral coalitions, attracting both precarious middle-class sectors and segments of the electorate traditionally linked to the left, particularly in contexts of economic hardship or institutional disaffection.

Second, the absence of electoral analysis limits the possibility of establishing an empirical triangulation between party ideology, programme, and voter behaviour. Such triangulation is essential for assessing the coherence—or dissonance—between a party's ideological positioning, its programmatic proposals, and the actual motivations of its supporters. For instance, Vox's discourse in defence of the working class cannot be empirically contrasted with its electoral support patterns; similarly, the effectiveness of PiS's redistributive policies cannot be evaluated in terms of electoral loyalty or mobilisation without reference to survey data or post-electoral studies.

Incorporating a systematic analysis of electoral behaviour—whether through national surveys, post-electoral studies, or comparative—would significantly enrich the comparative framework and add a complementary sociological dimension to the analysis. It would also allow for the exploration of potential divergences between the discourses parties articulate and the actual social profiles of those who support them.

In sum, although this dissertation deliberately focuses on the ideological and institutional dimensions of the PRR, a promising line of future research would involve integrating the study of electoral behaviour and socio-demographic composition of party electorates as a key element for understanding the consolidation and political impact of the PRR in different national contexts.

Ultimately, these limitations do not undermine the analytical contributions of this dissertation. Rather, they delineate the empirical boundaries of the study and highlight the importance of continued comparative research on the PRR across different national contexts.

7.4 Future research directions

While this dissertation provides a detailed and comparative analysis of the ideological, programmatic, and institutional development of Vox and PiS, it also reveals a number of promising avenues for further research. These directions could help refine the understanding of the PRR in Europe and address the empirical and analytical limitations outlined in the previous section.

1. Expansion towards multi-case comparative design

Future research could build on this two-case study by incorporating a broader range of PRR parties from different European regions. Including cases such as Chega (Portugal), Fidesz (Hungary), the Slovak National Party, Rassemblement National (France), Alternative für Deutschland (Germany), or the Sweden Democrats would facilitate both the identification of regional subtypes and the development of more generalisable typologies of the PRR. Such comparative work would also enable researchers to test the explanatory power of the conceptual and empirical frameworks employed in this dissertation—such as the triad of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, or the liberal versus interventionist economic cleavage—across a wider variety of political, cultural, and institutional contexts.

2. Intra-family competition and emerging challengers

An additional avenue for future enquiry involves the examination of emerging competitors within the same party family. In both Spain and Poland, new radical right formations have begun to contest the political space previously dominated by Vox and PiS, potentially reshaping the ideological landscape of the PRR. In Spain, the rise of SALF signals the emergence of a more populist and digitally mediated challenger to Vox, characterised by anti-establishment rhetoric, social conservatism, and personalist mobilisation. In Poland, Konfederacja has consolidated its position as a libertarian-nationalist alternative to PiS, particularly among younger and more economically liberal segments of the electorate. Comparative analyses between Vox and SALF, or PiS and Konfederacja, could shed light on dynamics of intra-family differentiation, ideological substitution, and party system fragmentation. This line of enquiry may constitute a distinct research agenda focused on political competition within the PRR.

3. Electoral behaviour and socio-demographic analysis

As noted in the limitations section, this dissertation did not incorporate a systematic analysis of the social bases of support for Vox and PiS. Future research should address this gap by engaging in voter-level analysis using national election surveys, the European Social Survey (ESS), the European Election Study (EES), or post-electoral studies. Such an approach would help illuminate how socio-demographic variables—such as class, gender, age, education, and geography—interact with PRR ideology and mobilisation strategies. It would also facilitate empirical triangulation between party discourse, programme, and voter motivation.

4. Discourse, media strategies, and digital mobilisation

Further research could examine the communicative strategies of PRR parties, particularly within digital environments. Analyses of social media campaigns, platform narratives, and algorithmic targeting could deepen our understanding of how these parties mobilise emotions, intensify polarisation, and construct antagonistic narratives of 'the people' versus 'the elite.' This line of investigation would be particularly valuable for studying the transnationalisation of PRR discourse, as exemplified by Vox's Viva summits and similar events.

5. Transnational dynamics and alliances

The increasingly transnational character of the PRR also warrants further academic attention. The creation of new alliances such as Patriots for Europe, alongside continuing realignments within the European Parliament, highlights the need to examine strategic cooperation, ideological convergence, and intra-family tensions at the supranational level. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of the PRR as an evolving European political force operating beyond its national expressions and in relation to supranational governance structures such as the European Union.

In sum, the study of the PRR in Europe remains a rapidly evolving and theoretically rich field. Building on the findings of this dissertation, future research should continue to explore the ideological complexity, institutional trajectories, and societal impacts of radical right populism, while adapting to its shifting political and geopolitical manifestation.

The evidence directly addresses the research questions and broadly confirms the working hypotheses: the PRR in Europe is heterogeneous rather than uniform; and Vox and PiS—while members of the same party family—constitute distinct, nationally embedded subtypes shaped by historical legacies, party-system dynamics, and political opportunity structures. The thesis's principal contribution is a replicable, multidimensional framework that integrates discourse and programme analysis with CHES 2024 (Rovny et al. 2024), to map PRR profiles across ideological, economic, and contextual axes. Normatively and theoretically, the study argues for moving beyond monolithic labelling towards context-sensitive, regionally grounded comparisons that link ideology to institutional position and trajectory, and it shows how the PRR's normalisation refracts through mainstream party adaptation. Looking ahead, extending this design to additional cases and voter-level data, and tracking digital mobilisation and transnational alliances longitudinally, will test the durability and scope conditions of these claims.

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